Time Keeps on Slippin'

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/15004613.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham
Additional Tags:	Time Loop, Murder, Not Canon Compliant, Violence, trying my hardest to be sexy, is it working? am i doin a sexy?, Blood and Gore, Psychological Thriller/Horror
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2018-06-21 Updated: 2019-07-05 Words: 27,077 Chapters: 4/?

Time Keeps on Slippin'

by InconvenientBrilliance

Summary

Worn out and exhausted, Will Graham has been ordered to take a vacation at the risk of losing FBI clearance. Frustrated but left with little other option, Will accepts tickets to a cruise destined for sunny skies and warm beaches. Not all goes to plan when they sail through a rift, leaving them trapped in a time distortion where Will catches the eye of the demon in charge.

Notes

Good afternoon! I'm here today after playing with some ideas that were very much influenced by Happy Death Day and the dream I had on repeat for like a week. First time foray into writing in the Hannibal fandom but I am hoping I have something pretty alright here. First chapter's kind of short so dive on in and if you have time please offer me praise or give me suggestions on how I can make it better!

In Which Everything Seems Perfectly Fine

"'You need this vacation,' they said, 'You need to relax,' they said. Fan-fucking-tastic." Exasperation and exertion tempered the words of the FBI consultant who had had it just about up to here with the shenanigans aboard this ship. And as he mumbled to himself, upside down, covered in dust and fiddling with wires he knew very little about, Will Graham found himself contemplating how it was, exactly, he had come to be where he was. Trapped on a cruise liner, in the middle of what he was calling the Bermuda Square, with someone (or more accurately, something) gunning for his life. He grimaced as his hunting knife slipped, the tip slicing the pad of his forefinger, but kept his grip as he continued stripping the wire in his hand.

"And who cares if I electrocute myself down here? It's not like I've tried raising the alarm, or radioing for help, or tried to leave this damn boat or anything so it's not like-shit!" It turns out fiddling with wires and trying to restart a downed engine were not as easy as he had hoped, as evidenced now by the tingling in his still bleeding finger. It took all of his self-control to keep from throwing the knife and himself around like a toddler having a temper tantrum as the engine remained dead and silent and dark around him. He'd be lying if he said he even knew what he was looking at. Frustrated, furious, and certain now that he was going insane, Will crawled out from beneath the wiring and leaned against the nearby wall. His finger throbbed and absently he popped it in his mouth, sucking gently on the still weeping wound. Getting the engine going had been one of the options left for him and now it seemed as fruitless and as impossible as the multitude of things he'd tried. Still, his mind whirled in thought as he wondered how the hell he could make it all stop.

Time passed as well as it was able to. And as it did, he remembered.

OoOoOoO

"A cruise, Jack?"

"Yes, Will, a cruise. Complete with late night bingo, parties after ten, and all the shuffleboard you can play."

"What about my dogs?"

"Alana has graciously agreed to watch over your entire pack for the two-week duration."

"Two weeks?! What about my classes, and what about you guys? Crime isn't going to stop while I'm gone, Jack."

"You're right, Will, crime isn't going to stop. Which means that it will still be here when you get back. And come on, you don't really think I'm so out of the loop that I don't know this is spring break?"

Will sat silently across from Jack in his office, fingers nervously drumming against the arms of the chair. Excuses raced through his mind, one after the other, as he tried to figure out how

he could avoid getting on that damn boat. Not that he was afraid of boats or the open water; but the thought of the confined space, of dealing with people in a way that was intimate and oppressive, was not something he wanted to put himself through. His frustration and irritation must have been showing because Jack sighed and leaned back in his chair suddenly.

"Listen, Will," he said. "Dr. Bloom is under the assumption that we are pushing you too hard. She believes that we are going to break you if we don't force you to take some kind of vacation. A sabbatical, I believe is what she called it." He smirked and offered up a small shrug even as Will opened his mouth to disagree.

"I know you may not think it ideal…but there are two options here, as far as I can see them. Either you take this opportunity for an all-expenses-paid vacation, enjoy it, come back refreshed and ready to take on crime again. Or you can fight, and scratch, and bite, and argue with me until I have to suspend you indefinitely from FBI headquarters."

"You guys need me."

"You're right, which is why you're going to go on this damn cruise."

"Jesus, Jack, you're really not going to drop this, are you?"

"Nope."

"Fine." The exhausted empath of the FBI had given in. The argument was circuitous, and Will could tell that there would be no winning this. He was going on the ship and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

"Great. You leave in two days." Will's jaw dropped, a fresh wave of refusal bubbling to the surface as he considered just how little time he had to prepare.

"How the hell am I supposed to-,"

"I already told you, Will, that we have everything covered. Literally the only thing you need to take care of is packing. Go home and pack; that's not a suggestion, Will." Huffing, Will ran his hand anxiously through his hair, grinding his teeth and gritting his jaw and admitting finally to himself that there was no way out of this. Truthfully, he was a little relieved. The last couple of months had been overwhelmingly exhausting and his nightmares were getting out of control. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept through the night, let alone been able to hold a conversation for longer than a couple minutes. Even facing away from him, Will could feel Jack staring holes into the back of his head. They were worried. All of them. And he couldn't say it wasn't warranted.

Not trusting himself to say anything else, lest he try to start another argument, Will could only nod and offer up something like a half-hearted wave in Jack's direction before turning to leave.

"Oh and…one more thing, Will," Will paused, hand on the door frame at Jack's voice.

"Just…try to have some fun, okay? Two weeks. Just relax and play shuffleboard and get drunk and maybe meet a nice woman…or man…just let go for two weeks. That's an order, Will. Let go." Will's jaw worked for a moment, cheeks flushed and unsure how to handle the comment regarding his apparently cautiously wavering sexuality, before he was able to speak.

"I'll try, Jack."

OoOoOoO

"Winston is going to try and get extra treats, and more food whenever you feed them. He always acts like he's starving."

"Will."

"You don't necessarily have to walk them, either. But if you just wander around outside with them for a bit and maybe throw a ball for them they would love that."

"Will."

"They also get a little lonely. At night, I mean. They tend to sleep in the same room with me but if you aren't going to stay here just make sure you give them some-,"

"Will. Seriously. Stop." Will paused in what was slowly but surely becoming a rant and huffed himself into silence. Agitation had him gnawing at his lower lip even as Alana Bloom slowly reached out for his forearms. He flinched, and she slowed but did not stop reaching for him. Her hands lit on his arms gently, delicately, and after a moment he calmed and allowed the contact to happen.

"Listen. I'm going to stay here with all of them. I was hoping that wouldn't be too forward? But they seem pretty used to having your presence around, and I was hoping to help them, and you, by staying here to watch them. Is that going to be okay?" Will nodded, not trusting himself to speak past the lump in his throat. He had been concerned in Jack's office, worried about leaving his animals alone for two weeks, but seeing them was something else. Realizing that he wouldn't be able to see them, and that he would essentially be without them, for two weeks. Two and a half if he considered the flight times and hotels before the cruise.

"Will?"

"No. No, Alana, that would be fine. I just, I haven't been separated from them since…,"

"Since you first brought them home, I know. And I understand how much they mean to you. I won't let anything happen. And just think! By the time you get back, they're going to have missed you so much you won't be able to calm them down no matter how many times you throw that old ball of yours." He stifled a laugh and managed a smile. Alana was right. And while he still felt a little betrayed, a little upset that she was the one that had pushed Jack into starting this whole thing, he knew deep down that she was right. He sighed, oblivious to how he leaned into her touch or how he swayed on his feet as they talked.

"Good. Now that that's settled, get packing. I'm also here to make sure you don't pack an entire suitcase full of underwear." He nodded and, together, they found his suitcase and helped him pack and prepare for his vacation.

Two Days Later

"Alright group B! Gather around my dulcet, charming voice and get ready for the cruise of your lives!" Will grimaced but joined the rest of group B as they congregated around an extremely tall, extremely handsome African American man with probably the cleanest and most well-kept uniform Will had ever laid eyes on. The flight had gone well, the hotel he had stayed in was average and he had been given permission to order as many tiny treats as he wanted from room service but being separated from his baggage and having no idea what he was getting into set him off and made him uncomfortable. He tried to relax as the rest of group B congregated around him, jostling him and brushing against his back and arms and legs and-

"So I'm sure you all saw group A, acting superior and super excited because they're the first group on the ship, but what THEY don't know is that the best snacks aren't out on the welcome table until after 10 and would you look at that, it's 9:45." Scattered laughter and Will felt himself relax ever so slightly; there was something vaguely enchanting about the crewmember who was currently leading them up what he was excitedly calling the "gangplank." He took in the enormity and overall majesty that was the cruise liner; he'd been informed that they were going to the Bahamas, Bermuda, and the Caribbean which meant that he would be given a wonderful, beautiful break from the icy weather they'd been experiencing. As he chewed on his lip, listening vaguely as the crew member (whose name seemed to be Arnold) described the origins of the liner and began outlining and detailing the safety precautions that the crew of Liner 685 had laid out for them.

"And last but not least, the lifeboats. Unlike the Titanic, we have plenty of lifeboats, more lifeboats than we know what to do with. So rest easy, incredibly attractive young, scruffy man with the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen who has neither spoken a word nor laughed at a single joke I've made the entire time I've been up here. No harm shall come to a single hair upon thy brow." Will felt himself flushing as the man's words fully hit home. The group around him tittered, tiny whispers filtering through the ranks around them. Will's smile was genuine and nervous and cute but he was not aware of any of this as he anxiously scratched at his hair and tried not to meet the glittering eyes of Arnold. It would have been a lie to say Will was not flattered.

"In any case! Treats are now officially available on the veranda and you can find me near the chocolate fountain. We will be setting sail in roughly an hour and at that point I suggest you head to the bow, the front of the ship in fancy ship speak, to see us set off." Arnold found Will's eyes, offered a wolfish grin and a hopeful wink and sauntered off to join the small group of crewmen who were chatting after having finished their own tours. Will caught the eyes of a few of the other passengers, the majority of whom were still grinning and giggling at him, before he quickly made his way to the least populated area of deck. Even on a good day being surrounded by people was something he did his best to avoid; he was already reaching his limits on human interaction for the day. Leaning against the guardrail, staring

absently out at the dock and at the passengers and crew as they busied themselves preparing the ship and themselves to set sail.

Will wasn't sure how long he stood there, staring out at nothing and wondering how his puppies were getting along without him, when he felt a shift in the breeze and the presence of another person beside him.

"I hope you didn't mind my little bit of fun back there." Ah, Arnold had found him. Will chuckled and shook his head, leaning his chin into his upturned palm.

"No, no. It's fine." Play it cool, right?

"Oh good," Movement drew Will's eye and he turned just enough to catch Arnold leaning casually against the railing beside him, facing the deck rather than the ocean.

"Then hopefully I'll see you around; after all, we'll be sharing the same ship for two weeks. Maybe we…can get some drinks sometime?"

"Yeah, I dunno. I'm not one really one for social interactions."

"Mmmm, but are you one for drinks?" Will laughed and shrugged; the man was persistent, that much was true at least.

"No promises, Arnold." Arnold laughed and clapped his hands together.

"Better than a no! I'll see you around, then; we're about to set sail." With a wink and a loose salute, Arnold pushed off the railing leaving Will to his own devices. Again, time passed and the world faded until an announcement overhead suggested that everybody head below deck to meet in the dining area. Will turned to find himself alone and, with a sigh, headed below deck to join the others.

OoOoOoO

Will had to admit, as they entered tropical waters and shed winter like an icy coat for warm weather and sunny skies, that maybe this had been a good idea. They'd been at sea for nearly a week and had made port once and were on their way to the second one as he basked in the sun. He was paler than he'd thought but apparently more in shape than he'd previously believed as was evidenced by the somewhat consistent, always uncomfortable, approaches by random cruise-goers as he lay in the sun. Eventually he managed to find a relatively safe sunning spot, away from the noise and loudness of his fellow travelers and peaceful enough where he could read one of his many books or work on one of his many crosswords in silence. Most of the time he just doodled, aimlessly wondering how his dogs were and whether anything new or violent was happening back home. Slowly his pale skin gained a warmish glow, his nose always pink with a little bit of sunburn.

He sighed and pushed himself up from the lounge, wondering if he could still get a late lunch from the buffet inside. He had yet to run into Arnold again in a way that would allow drinks to occur and he was surprised to find himself disappointed with this development.

He wandered.

His sleep schedule had normalized somewhat, after his body acclimated to the constant rocking of the ship. He rose early, ate breakfast before the majority of people were awake, then spent enough time wandering the ship and mapping the layout for the sun to fully have risen. He sunbathed, napped, and generally did what he could to keep his mind from thinking too much about home. It was difficult, but people watching and dozing had an overall calming effect on the worn empath's mind.

Lunch was decent (baked chicken, Caesar salad, and a chocolate chip cookie that the woman watching over the food had kept aside for him; it turned out that being genuinely nice to people tended to result in positive things) but before long he felt himself growing restless and again set out to wander the ship. Though the crew were always busy, many of them had grown used to seeing him, scruffy and bleary-eyed at 4 AM wandering the ship, and most said nothing other than offering a loose wave. The anxiety he felt being trapped on a ship in the middle of the ocean had dissipated only slightly and walking kept himself calm. Occasionally he would sit in for a hand of poker or watch a movie when it was a classic or the mood struck him, but for the most part Will felt himself content to wander.

Until the ship ground to a halt.

Will stumbled in the hallway, tripping over his own feet and slamming into the nearest wall. Shouts of dismay and surprise rang out from the nearby bar as drinks sloshed and glasses broke. Panic rose, quick and sharp, as he righted himself and looked around. This was a first; not only were they not set to dock for another day and a half at the nearest port, but each time they had it had been gentle and slow, the only tell an almost imperceptible jolt as the ship came to a full stop. The hairs along the back of his neck began to rise, muscles tensed and alert as he listened for some sort of announcement or alert that they had run aground or hit something. Around him, passenger began to appear, muttering and mumbling about the noise and the sudden stopping of the ship. Others complained about ruined pants and lost drinks nearby and still others demanded that someone tell them what was going on. Realizing that he had been standing, frozen, in the hallway for nearly five full minutes now Will regained his equilibrium and turned to head to the top of deck. Regardless of where he was he would hear the announcement loud and clear and he hoped that if he got free of the ship he would stop feeling so suddenly claustrophobic.

Others seemed to share his sentiments and with little more than a nod in any one direction, Will and a handful of other passengers made their way to the deck. Just as they reached the surface the loudspeakers crackled to life around them.

"Attention. Attention passengers. We appear to be having some technical difficulties; the engine has overheated and has shut itself down via safety protocol. We expect it to be up and running a couple of hours. We will continue to update you as we continue. Thank you." Will braced himself for panic and chaos as they fanned out across the deck but was surprised to find the overwhelming majority laughing and joking about the free drinks they would most certainly have to hand out to compensate for the schedule being thrown off. He made his way to the railing and watched as the sun began its descent below the horizon. As he watched the explosion of colors paint the sky Will could not quite seem to find a reason why his stomach

churned and his jaw clenched. Around him came the grumbles of those on a vacation frustrated to be waylaid but overall still delighted to be in the middle of the ocean and away from their responsibilities. Before him was spread a seemingly endless sea, waves and water lapping delicately against the hull of the ship.

Movement caught his eye and he whirled, heart racing, to find the deck nearly empty. He must have lost track of time because the sun had set and night was upon him. His hands maintained their grip on the railing behind him and though his heart palpitated in his chest he could see no reason why that should be. Sweat began to bead on his brow and he was having trouble maintaining a calm breath. He paused, detecting what he thought was movement in the shadows against the doorframe where obviously he could see there now stood a man-

He blinked and there was nothing.

Will frowned and sighed and pushed free from the railing rubbing at his eyes as he made his way back inside the ship and slowly ambled towards his room. His hands shook as adrenaline ebbed free of his system. Whether the sudden shock of the ship stopping or his loss of time (he thought he'd been getting better but apparently, he was not not), Will Graham was suddenly exhausted and could think of nothing better than sleep. As he fumbled his keycard against the door and stumbled inside his room, Will ran through the names of his dogs in his head. He considered each one for a long while, bringing to mind their faces and names as he kicked his shoes off and quickly stripped for bed. By the time he was ready to crawl in between the covers his heart rate had slowed and the sweat had dried from his face. He was asleep nearly the moment his head touched the pillow.

OoOoOoO

Just outside Will's room two men stood side by side with another, taller gentleman, whose poise and refinement could be sensed simply by looking at him.

"I told you he was interesting, sir," Arnold's voice lilted just above a whisper in the quiet din of the hallway. "There's something wholly unique about him; like he's been here before. I've only ever sensed this when…well, when you first joined us."

From the man beside him there was no comment. Only the slow, lazy unfurling of a smile that held more than mischief in its' depths.

In Which Things Are Probably Not Fine

Chapter Notes

> Hey there! I've never received such a wealth of positivity or excitement from anything I've ever written so to say I'm excited would be an understatement. And while it seems like chapters have been a bit far off, I've also never written a second chapter so quickly. I didn't think people would like this very much and I must say, you all have definitely encouraged me to keep going. So...thanks! As a warning, I'm more interested in story rather than truth so the layouts are not fully describing the ship well so I'm sorry about that for all you cruise-going aficionados. I'm also suffering from bronchitis and my fever has only just broken but I'm too excited to fully edit this so please forgive any typos I'm sure I'll go back and fix it later but I want to get this out sooner rather than later.
>
> In any case, I hope you enjoy my second chapter! Positivity keeps the engines running!

The morning broke slow and quiet, the gentle rocking of the ship bringing Will back to the waking world smoothly and relatively painlessly. His head ached, the gentle pounding throb of too much sleep and not enough water. With a grimace, Will sat up, running a hand through messy curls with disdain at the feel of hair that needed to be washed. The ship remained stationary and he wondered how long he had been asleep. Rather than check the time, he pulled himself groggily out of bed and swayed over to the bathroom, feeling somewhat nauseated by the more stable bobbing of the boat after having been at sea for so long.

A quick glance in the mirror confirmed that he did not, in fact, want to look any further at his face with his sunken cheeks and dark shadows beneath his eyes. He sighed, turning from the mirror as a wave of incomprehensible dread drifted over him like a shroud. It settled across his shoulders as he stepped into the shower to rinse his body free of night terror sweat. He moved mechanically, trying to clear his mind of thought and breathe in time with the almost imperceptible rocking of the ship. If the ship wasn't about to start moving he was going to need to adjust quickly or risk spending however long they were frozen at sea feeling sick.

"And how can I possibly enjoy my whiskey on the rocks if I'm throwing it up?" He mumbled, stepping free of the shower and groping for his towel. He carefully avoided the mirror on his way out of the bathroom, towel wrapped around his waist and hair dripping down the back of his neck. Will glanced out the sliding glass doors leading to the small balcony attached to his room as he dressed, wondering where exactly they were and how far they had drifted in the night. The sun had only just crested the horizon, and yet, it felt that he had been asleep for eons. He contemplated going back to sleep but a sudden audible gurgle from his stomach insisted otherwise.

He took roughly five minutes to gather himself emotionally and physically (namely, finding himself a shirt) and after ensuring he had his keycard in his back pocket, and with no further

delays he pushed his door open forcefully, confidently-

“What the hell, bro?!”

And immediately regretted it.

On the floor lay a young man who had been holding at least two drinks and what appeared to be a cake of some other frosted pastry and was now, instead, dressed in it.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t-,”

“Didn’t think or what, man?” Will paused and sighed; while the incident was indeed unfortunate for the young man Will did not think it was entirely his fault; the hallway was big enough to accommodate at least four people walking side-by-side and judging by the hazy look in his eyes, already drunk despite the early hour. He stooped, intending to offer whatever assistance he could think to offer but the man was already pushing himself shakily to his feet. The now empty cups he left on the floor, plastic and unbroken, their contents soaking in to the red diamond-patterned carpet.

“Stupid asshole.” The man muttered under his breath, weaving away from Will and heading further down the hall. Will sighed and bent to pick up the cups, intending to let someone know about the mess, and nearly bumped heads with a man he’d been loosely hoping to run into since they’d set sail.

“Oh damn it, I’m sorry Arnold I didn’t see you there.” Arnold laughed and Will flushed and fumbled with the empty cups in his hand.

“It’s no trouble, handsome,” he glanced down at the cups Will held. “Doing some early morning drinking?” Will glanced down at the mess and realized he was shaking his head before he’d even spoken.

“Not yet; I just bumped into another passenger who was carrying these drinks on my way out myself.”

“Ahhh, yes, I was just following the man you’re talking about; being that drunk this early I was concerned and hoping to make sure he got to his cabin safely.”

“Oh, so then, you wouldn’t be able,” Will cleared his throat, still fumbling with the glasses in his hand. “You wouldn’t happen to have time to get some food or something, right?” Arnold grinned, wolfish and wide, eyes twinkling in the fuzzy overhead lights.

“As much as I would love to join you while you imbibe what would surely be a most delicious meal, I’m afraid I have prior obligations.” Will tried to ignore the clenching in his jaw and the disappointment he felt, sharper than he would have guessed, as Arnold turned him down.

“However…I believe that my schedule would allow for a dinner of some kind, liquid or solid, say, 8:30? At the one and only true dining experience aboard this somewhat water-logged vessel?”

“Uh sure, yeah that sounds great, yeah.”

“Great! Well then, until later William.”

“Yeah, sure, until later Arnold.” The men nodded at each other, Arnold winked, and Will was left flustered and flummoxed as Arnold strode past him, following the path of the man who had created the mess Will continued to squish around on. He wasn’t sure how he felt that Arnold had referred to him as William, or the emphasis he had used on his name, but he was sure that he would need a double on that drink. There was a moment, a brief and altogether inconsequential moment, where Will wondered how Arnold had learned his name since he could not remember having told the man. Arnold, however, was crew and it was not crazy to think that he had found Will’s name out in some other way. Will wondered what Jack would say about his impromptu dinner date with Arnold and found himself smiling as he wandered the opposite direction, towards the elevators that would take him to the dining room area. He was certain that at least some of his colleagues would win a bet or two.

A relatively uneventful ride in the elevator, mind wandering and cups sticky in his hand, Will found himself face to face with an almost completely empty dining area. He frowned. Early though it may be, the sun was well up and normally at this time (later than his usual forays into food searching) there were at least a few families with little ones packing away fresh pancakes and orange juice.

The hairs on his arms stood on end and adrenaline rushed to his muscles as he felt his fight or flight instinct kick in. For a moment, he stood stock still and took in the entirety of the room before his eyes settled on the clock and he gasped audibly.

“It’s almost noon?” He managed. He was surprised, then, that there were still bits of breakfast available, as the staff typically had breakfast promptly cleaned up in the buffet area by no later than 10 with the promise of lunch on its’ way. His brow furrowed and he pulled out his watch to confirm the time and was further dismayed when it agreed with the clock on the wall.

“But I watched the sun rise…,” He murmured, slowly venturing into the dining area, eyes trained on the clock as he walked towards the remaining food. His stomach churned but he knew he had to get something in there or risk feeling ill later. “I watched the sun rise, I walked out of my room…ran into that guy, saw Arnold…and came straight here. How could it be almost noon?”

“Well, sir, I was just thinking you wouldn’t be stopping by!” Will snapped out of his mumbling reverie and found himself face to face with the man who’d been saving him an everything bagel each morning. With hands that were shaking a little too much, Will ran his hand over his face and rubbed his eyes until spots filled his vision.

“Yeah I must have lost track of time or something like that,” his voice was lighter than he felt and more sure than he was but Frank, the man who was now politely gesturing to where his daily everything bagel was stashed underneath the buffet area, was cheerful and seemed happy and this was more calming than anything else. He did little more than nibble at the somewhat stale breakfast food before offering his impromptu staff friend a half wave and

leaving towards the bar area in the center of the ship. The lunch crowd had started to filter in and they were more rowdy and awake than Will felt capable of dealing with in that moment.

The closer he got to the center of the ship the more on edge he felt, as though being cloistered in the inner bowels of the hulking vessel was somehow less safe than being outside or in his cabin. He took note of this but forged on, determine now to make that double a triple and then escape to the deck in the hopes of enjoying the calm waters. He passed others headed the same way he was going and dodged around those headed back towards the buffet area. Will was quickly and easily annoyed with the level of traffic he had thus far been avoiding by being active in the earlier parts of the morning and cursed himself for dozing off or losing time or whatever had caused him to be so late. Whatever he was feeling or experiencing seemed isolated in his own head; the rest of the cruise-goers were loud and excited, some being dragged by children towards the pool area, and others cheerfully discussing the free gifts they were being offered by the staff who were trying to compensate for the still overheated engine. Will wondered just how long they would be floating at sea and made a mental note to find someone with more information as soon as he had imbibed his lunch.

The quickly fraying FBI empath, who wanted nothing more than his quadruple and to escape to the deck with his book of crosswords or his sketchbook or literally just a towel. He needed to steady his nerves and find his center and none of that was possible will the continuous traffic that kept stepping on his toes and bumping into him. He managed to enter the bar relatively unscathed and in the blink of an eye was at the counter trying to grab the attention of the bartender. The moment she turned around he recognized her and heat rushed to his cheeks. Of all the people manning the counter why did it have to be the woman he drunkenly told about his dogs? All of his dogs, with pictures and sadness and laments about not having all of them in his bed to snuggle with and oh god she was getting that look in her eyes that said she recognized him.

“Oh! Dog guy! Dog guy I haven’t seen you in a while, how are you? Still missing all your babies?” He groaned, audibly, and wished he could sink into the floor with that entire bottle of whiskey he intended to take with him. He managed to mumble something akin to an apology, head ducked and hands shoved in his pockets. The woman (Sandy???) waved him off and already had a glass out and a giant ice cube in it.

“Hey hey, it’s okay,” she smiled and filled the glass to the top. “I’ve got a dog and two cats at home, I know how hard it can be to leave them behind.” She slid the glass over the counter to him and as he reached for it she settled her hand atop his; surprise brought his gaze back up from the ground to meet her soft brown eyes.

“If you need to talk or anything, you know where to find me.” She smiled, patted his hand, and withdrew leaving a napkin folded up between his fingers. Before he could say anything, she was back in the thick of it, taking orders and busy with the lunchtime rush. He watched her work for a moment or two before he left, napkin folded and tucked into his palm, and whiskey clutched tightly in his other hand. Once outside he paused and opened the napkin revealing the name ‘Sandy’ in cursive writing and a room number beneath it. His flush darkened and he stared at the ceiling in the hallway, wondering how the hell he’d gotten himself mixed up in this weird series of romantic situations when he could barely speak to people in his daily life. His gaze strayed to the whiskey which he then reverently sipped,

ignoring the curious looks of people walking past him. The burn of the alcohol soothed his nerves and warmed his throat and belly and, stuffing the napkin into his back pocket for later consideration, he made his way out of the crowded hallway.

He reached the deck with relatively few surprises (apart from a couple who thought the elevator was their bedroom and were only slightly upset with Will when they ran into him) and as he emerged into bright sunshine he wondered at how active and alert and awake the cruise-goers seemed to be. Everywhere could be found families and couples and groups of people loudly and raucously laughing or enjoying some on-deck entertainment. It was as though one giant party had broken out and his invitation had been neglected. Maintaining a death grip on his now half empty glass, Will made his way towards a small group of people with whom a staff member appeared to be arguing. He hoped, finally, that he could get some information about just what the hell was going on and when they would be moving on towards their destination.

“But you said that we could get ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS worth of drink tickets! You haven’t even given us a handful of them and we haven’t had any word on the boat trouble!”

“Ma’am I appreciate what you’re saying but we are currently working on sending out tickets to everyone of age on the ship. If you haven’t received yours yet we apologize and will-,”

“I don’t want your APOLOGY I want my DRINKS.” Will was quickly losing his patience with an argument that seemed to be going nowhere fast.

“If you’ll just wait a moment I can have someone-,”

“No I want my tickets now or so help me-,” The woman, who was becoming more and more shrill and whiny as the seconds passed, gasped audibly as the last quarter of Will’s precious whiskey sloshed along her feet. He would have been lying if he said there hadn’t been some joy in listening to the ‘thunk’ as the Titanic sized ice cube slammed into her toes.

“Oh no, my drink.” He muttered as the woman was dragged away by what was either her girlfriend or her sister. Secretly he hoped her tickets were lost in the mail. Forever. A moment or two passed, during which Will allowed the crewmember to gather themselves, before he approached the harried person dressed similarly to Arnold. Although their uniform was not so well pressed as Arnold’s, Will figured he could give them a break considering the argument he’d just witnessed.

“Whatever you need, it’s yours,” They said, running a hand over what was originally a careful updo but was now a messy bun. “Seriously, free drink tickets for life I don’t care.”

“Well that is very kind of you and I certainly won’t turn that down. But I was wondering what was going on with the engine?” The crewmember crossed their arms and straightened up.

“According to the engineers, the engine is…. almost fixed? They’re a little confused; they’ve told us that the engine has fully cooled, but it isn’t starting. They are running the entire system through a reboot program or something and they’re hoping that by first thing in the morning it will be up and running.” Will sighed and scratched at the back of his head,

frustrated but pleasantly buzzed and in the sunshine and realizing that he shouldn't be as upset as he felt.

"Don't worry, sir, I'm sure we'll be on our way and almost at port by midmorning tomorrow. The engineers seemed pretty sure of themselves. This may seem frustrating but unfortunately, it's pretty common. At least out here in this area. We've had this happen a couple of times, which is why we always have extra drink tickets or reimbursement checks or whatever we need to placate, er, fix the situation with our lovely passengers. Now," They smiled and pulled out a sheaf of paper from their pocket. "How about I pass you on a few tickets and disappear before Susan the soccer mom comes back to harass me again?" Will smiled, feeling somewhat unsure of himself and the overall situation but definitely unwilling to pass on the drink tickets. He reached out, accepted what the crewmember was offering them, and offered a half-hearted wave as they escaped quickly below deck.

A quick glance confirmed that he'd been gifted with more drink coupons than he could possibly use in one trip (assuming he didn't wish to lapse into alcohol poisoning), and feeling somehow satisfied and calmed by this, he wandered slowly towards his spot in the shade away from the overall hustle on deck. Although the feeling of unease lingered he tried not to focus on it. He'd neglected to bring a book or any crossword, but rather than return to his room for one, he settled on a lounge chair and watched the people go about their activities instead. There was something, he decided as he leaned back further into the shady alcove he'd found for himself, altogether soothing and somewhat comforting in people watching. Seeing that there was no panic, no concern, nor any apparent terror in the elderly playing shuffleboard or the kids jumping into the pool nearby helped him find his center.

Will wasn't sure how long he stayed like that, watching people go about their various cruise-related activities, but the next thing he knew he was jolted awake by what he immediately saw to be a beach ball.

"Shit, sorry man! We didn't see you there! You okay?" Dramatically Will grasped at his chest, reaching for the ball with the intention of tossing it back towards the teens that were jogging towards him.

"I might have been startled into a heart attack but otherwise I'm perfectly-," His gaze shifted to the sky and he found himself swearing as he scrambled to his feet. The sun was just starting to dip below the horizon and he was going to be late for his meeting (date?) with Arnold. He tossed them the ball and immediately booked it to the elevators, cursing his apparently flimsy grasp on time as he made his way to his room. Something about this felt… wrong. Off. Not only did he not remember nodding off (normally he would pull himself out of the sun entirely to ensure he did not burn to a crisp), but he could have sworn he'd only just sat down. His stomach started to churn and he groaned, head held momentarily in his hands as he tried to regain some semblance of control over his spiraling panic and the worry that Arnold would be disgusted with his lateness. And while he knew he had no hope of impressing Arnold, Will was hoping to see him looking at least somewhat put together. This stranger on a boat did not need to know just what kind of a wild mess he himself was in his daily life and he certainly didn't need to know that he was officially losing track of time in a way that was starting to upset him.

Moving quickly he made it back to his room, fobbed himself in, and made for the shelves that he had hastily stuffed his clothes into earlier that week. Some hopeless digging turned up one of four collared shirts he'd packed and, luckily, the dark blue button-up was both clean and relatively free of wrinkles despite having been crammed into a drawer for several days. A fresh pair of slacks that he'd draped over the chair in the corner, a quick hand running through hair, and a splash of water on his lightly burned cheeks created an image of a man who could probably function normally in society. Will said a quick, silent prayer to whatever Gods might be listening, and exited his room trying to move quickly without looking like he was running.

OoOoOoO

There were multiple places a person might find food or drink aboard the MS Event Horizon. Will was familiar, for the most part, with the snazzy bar and the buffet area that he'd been frequenting but he was assuming that Arnold had not meant either of these places. Rather Will imagined it was the restaurant at the center of the ship, Galaxy, that they would be meeting in. He glanced at his watch and was relieved to find that it was only 8:15 as he strode in through the doors and into the small waiting area in front of the well-dressed maître d. The young woman, wearing a beautiful pinstriped dark suit jacket and pencil skirt, blonde hair in a ponytail over her shoulder, looked up from her writing and flashed an award-winning brilliant smile at him.

"Good evening, sir, did you need a seat or were you waiting for someone?" Will opened and closed his mouth, looking like a fish thrust unceremoniously on land and told to speak German, as he tried to figure out how to play this. Was he early enough to have beaten Arnold there? Was Arnold already there? And how did he know he wasn't going to get Arnold in trouble? And, belatedly, was this a date??? Was he over-dressed or under-dressed and where was he supposed to,-

"Right on time, Will!" From just behind him came a familiar voice and all at once Will jumped and relaxed and smiled and blushed and wondered what the hell he was doing. He glanced towards the woman and was relieved to see her smile had only widened and that she didn't appear to be calling any security on either of them.

"Arnold, is this handsome man the one you were meeting here? You should have told me, and I would have found him a seat already. And maybe a drink; he looks like he could use one."

"Perhaps, but I had originally planned to beat him here and choose the best table ahead of time. But you know how the captain is; there were things I had to do before I was free for the evening and I lost track of time." Will did not miss the hint of danger in Arnold's voice and Will's flush deepened; was Arnold warning the woman off? He hadn't thought that Arnold was that serious about his interest regarding Will but it wouldn't be the first time he'd been slow on the uptake.

"I hope you were not waiting long, William?"

"No, no. I just got here a minute ago myself."

“Excellent.” Arnold smiled and strode confidently towards the maître d, whose name Will was just now noticing, was Aria. He joined her behind the little stand and glanced down at the tables. After a moment, he pointed to one, she nodded, and he was gesturing for Will to follow him. Ignoring Aria’s wink and hoping that he wasn’t making a mistake, Will followed Arnold to a series of tables set up against the window. He was relieved when Arnold gestured for him to choose a seat and sat so that he could see the door, a habit he’d gained when first consulting for the FBI. Arnold seemed satisfied to take the other seat and, as though they’d choreographed the entire moment, sat down opposite one another and immediately interrupted each other.

“So I was-,”

“I didn’t mean to-,” The both paused, and Arnold chuckled while Will cleared his throat and gestured for Arnold to continue.

“I was hoping to order for us if that isn’t too presumptuous. I happened to speak with the chef earlier and know what’s the freshest options are on the menu.” Will shrugged and leaned back in his chair.

“By all means. I haven’t eaten here yet so I’m not familiar with what they have.” Arnold grinned and passed over what Will instantly knew to be the drink menu.

“I will, however, give you the honor of choosing the drinks for us.” Will smiled and accepted the proffered menu.

“You do understand I drink whiskey and…whiskey, right?” Arnold smiled and Will smiled and overall Will thought he was doing pretty good.

The waiter came and Arnold ordered and the whiskey was brought and they talked, and they laughed and for the first time since Jack brought him into his office and told him that he was being forced on vacation Will was enjoying himself. Minutes passed and eventually their waiter returned, two plates of what looked like steak in hand. Despite raised eyebrows from Will, their plates were settled in front of them and the waiter excused.

“I have to admit, I had assumed it would be fish. Seeing as how we are literally in the middle of the ocean.” Arnold raised a finger and waggled it to suggest just how much of a mistake that would have been.

“They only offer steak every couple of days and it’s Kobe; the fish they won’t do until tomorrow so we’re better off getting the steak tonight and the fish tomorrow.” Will’s heart skipped a beat and he tried to tell himself to stop being so ridiculous and not to assume that Arnold was again asking him out for dinner and was instead just informing him of the way the restaurant worked so that he, Will, could choose fish the next night. When he came here. Alone. Inextricably. Alone and definitely not accompanied by the still marvelously attractive man who was staring at him expectantly from across the table oh god he asked him a question didn’t he. Yup. That was the face of a man who had just asked a question and was waiting for some kind of response. Will cleared his throat.

“Yes. Yes that’s a very important thing. That you’ve just said. Right there. Important.” Inwardly he groaned as he forced a smile and wondered why he had said yes to dinner. Arnold leaned forward, hands laced and chin on his hands. There was something in his eyes that Will found himself unable to fully understand. Something curious and, again, predatory. But the man blinked and the look was gone and he was smiling again.

“You haven’t heard a word I’ve said, have you?”

“I heard the words you JUST said, so that’s not entirely true.” Arnold chuckled and returned to his steak.

“Well. What will you do when we make port again? I’ve noticed you don’t always go to shore with the rest of the passengers.” Will paused for a moment, thoughtfully chewing on the most delicious steak he had ever had the good fortune to put in his mouth, before responding.

“I suppose it depends. I usually choose not to leave if everyone else is too excited. I don’t like getting caught up in the rush and I especially don’t like port cities. They’re bad enough when the passengers are bored but if everyone is feeling stir crazy and excited for beaches or whatever then it’s just unbearable. For me at least it’s bad,” He shrugged. “I’d just rather enjoy some silence or the sound of the ocean from here in those cases.”

“I had kind of assumed that to be the case. You don’t ever really do any of the activities here.” Will’s lip curled in something like disgust.

“You mean the ‘discos’ and the ‘parties’ and the ‘late-night whatevers’ that you guys host? No, it’s not really my style or my thing. Sorry if that offends.” Arnold laughed and waved his hands gently in front of him dismissing the idea that he could possibly be offended by this statement.

“To be honest, I’m not all that excited for them myself. It can be fun sometimes, like when the DJ is cool and plays the stuff that I slip him or when they let us relax and actually join the party instead of watching over it to make sure people like Mr. Hallway from earlier don’t fall overboard,” He sighed and returned to what was left of his meal. “Overall, it’s not the worst gig I’ve ever had. To be honest, I feel pretty lucky. With the way everything’s turned out.” His voice had grown wistful as he pushed around some mashed potatoes on his plate and Will could not help but think Arnold was talking about something completely different than what Will thought he was. Rather than question him, Will remained silent and simply watched the other man pick at his food. The moment passed in silence, both wrapped in their own thoughts, before the waiter returned and offered a dessert that both men declined.

Feeling pleasantly drunk and full, Will followed Arnold from the restaurant and down the hallway that would eventually lead them topside. They walked in a companionable silence, neither speaking and both wrapped up in their own thoughts until they found themselves leaning against the same railing they’d spoken at on that first day of the cruise. Will leaned his elbows on the railing, resting his chin gently in upturned palms as he contemplated the stars.

“One thing I will say about this whole cruise thing, seeing the sky like this, without any lights and surrounded by the open ocean is an experience I will never forget.”

“No, I don’t suppose you will.” Will froze, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. He hadn’t noticed that Arnold had hung back when they approached the railing but he turned now to see the man standing with a few feet between them, arms at his sides and eyes glittering with something that did not look friendly in the darkness.

“Wh-,” Arnold was on him faster than Will could have imaged any human could move. The man had grabbed him around the neck and lifted him off the ground as easily as though he were a weightless doll all in the time it took for him to blink. Will immediately began clawing at the man’s arms, scratching and kicking and fighting to free himself even as his body went into full panic mode and his head began to grow light. The rush of adrenaline had sent him into a frenzy that would have freed him in any other situation; while Will did not spend much of his off time in the gym, he was strong and being a consultant had taught him the importance of being aware and fast and keeping oneself alert. He wondered if the whiskey had been drugged.

“I’m sorry. Truly, I am. But it will only hurt for a moment, I can promise you that. And in the morning, we will know. Yes. In the morning we will know, one way or the other.” Will’s eyes were wide with panic and fear and pain as the man crushed his windpipe as easily as he had lifted him and without another word tossed him over the edge of the ship. Time seemed to slow for Will. He felt his legs brush against the railing as he tried in vain to hook his legs before he went overboard. His eyes remained locked with Arnold’s and he saw nothing as he fell, an empty blackness that seemed to encompass not only the man but the entirety of the ship itself. He felt the wind, whipping at his coat and buffeting his ears, and he could hear the gentle lapping of water against the side of the ship just before he hit.

And he saw the stars, sparkling and bright and beautiful in the sky above them.

Arnold had been right. The view was not something he would ever forget.

OoOoOoO

Gasping for air Will awoke, bolting upright in bed with a strangled cry that passed effortlessly through a trachea that was wholly intact and completely uninjured. He was soaked in sweat, heart thudding violently against his chest and it took him nearly a full minute before he realized he wasn’t struggling for breath in the black waters that he had just plummeted to his death in.

“What the fuck,” He whispered. “What the actual fuck is happening. What is happening right now. What the fuck.” He muttered to himself for another few minutes as he touched his chest and arms and legs and tried his best to convince himself that he wasn’t going insane. After his heart rate returned to normal and he was certain he wasn’t going to pass out the instant he stood up, Will swung his legs free of his tangled bedsheets and staggered into the bathroom. Nauseated, he groped for the shower and was relieved when the water started despite his blurry vision. His sweat-soaked clothes were just hitting the floor as he stepped into the still icy spray. He gasped and stood stock still until the water warmed, feeling awake and ready to try again at understanding what had happened the night before.

“Obviously I’m not dead. So that must have been a dream, right? Just a horrible nightmare.” And yet, this didn’t seem…right. The idea that he died struck a chord with him somewhere deeper than his consciousness and somehow, he couldn’t shake the feeling of hitting that water. Whatever was going on, he decided as he stepped free of the shower and dried himself off, he needed to find Arnold. Whether an intense dream or something else, Arnold was at the center of it and Will intended to figure out just what the fuck was going on.

Still nauseate but at least smelling clean, he grabbed his key fob and threw his door open-

“What the hell, bro?!” And immediately smashed into the same man he’d seen yesterday morning, spilling drinks and sending him staggering backwards. Will’s jaw went slack and his eyes wide as he stared at the man and tried to argue that yes, of course the same passenger would be at the same place at the same time carrying the same drinks in the same colored cups and yelling the same thing.

“I… Didn’t we do this yesterday?”

“What? Are you crazy or somethin’, bro?” The man groaned and glanced down at the soggy mess on the floor.

“I’m sorry I really didn’t see-,”

“See what, bro? Ugh, thanks a lot.” The man stormed off, swaying obviously and heavily on his feet, headed in the same direction as yesterday. The level of déjà vu Will was currently experiencing was intense and dizzying. If the same man as “yesterday” had done the same thing as he had “yesterday” then likely that meant that a certain handsome murderer was headed his way as well. Will whirled on his feet and staggered backwards, crunching one of the plastic cups under his foot, and saw Arnold striding purposefully towards him with a smile on his face. Will’s fight or flight kicked in and he tensed, jaw gritting as he prepared for a fight of some kind.

“Doing some early morning drinking, handsome?”

“Err, no. I was just leaving and I bumped into another passenger.” Tense and on edge, Will did his best to sound like he wasn’t totally under the impression that Arnold was a murderous crazy-pants and hoped that Arnold would leave quickly.

“Ahh, yes. I was just following the man you’re talking about; being that drunk this early I was concerned and hoping to make sure he got to his cabin safely.”

“Yes, that sounds pretty important. I’m just going to head up for some breakfast and wish you luck in checking on that drunk guy.” Will smiled as affably as he was capable of and made to step around Arnold. Arnold reached out for him and Will couldn’t stop his flinch as he ducked the man’s grasp. The other man blinked a couple of times, confusion and concern clouding his gaze, and Will sincerely hoped that his insane dreams weren’t just trying to ruin his chances of engaging socially and possibly romantically with someone.

“I was hoping that since my schedule would allow it, that we could have a dinner of some kind tonight? Liquid or solid, whatever your flavor. Say, 8:30? At the one and only true

dining experience aboard this somewhat water-logged vessel?" Will shivered at the familiarity with the entire situation and cleared his throat.

"I would love to, really, but I haven't been feeling well and was thinking of retiring to my room after breakfast for some rest." The lie came easily as it was mostly true, especially after the eerily similar phrasing of Arnold's date offer.

"Oh, well, I understand. The lack of motion has a lot of other passengers feeling pretty ill. Tell ya what, we'll postpone this 'till another night and maybe I can stop by with some ginger ale and crackers after my shift. My treat, cheap though it may be."

"Sure Arnold, that sounds uh…that sounds great." Arnold's smile returned, and he offered a two-fingerd salute beneath a wolfish grin that was as familiar as Arnold's next words.

"Great! Well then, until later William."

"Yeah, later." Feeling like he could bear no more of this uncomfortable conversation, Will turned on his heel and walked as quickly as he could away from Arnold. He was unable to ignore the feeling of being watched as he went and was careful to keep his gaze forward but his senses on high alert. His posture did not relax until he turned the corner leading to the main hallway that would take him to the elevator while simultaneously taking him out of eyesight range of the man he hoped he could avoid seeing later.

What he would have seen, had he turned around during his quick escape, was the sudden and altogether curious existence of a misty black cloud in the hallway just beside Arnold. Seconds passed and as they did a man seemed to step from the center of the small cloud, as though he had walked through an open doorway. He was taller than Arnold by a few inches, and refined in a way that spoke of knowledge and power and control. The man tugged at the cuffs of an impeccable dark blue suit and straightened the collar of the white undershirt beneath. Arnold stepped around and straightened the man's already straight tie. His face was beaming, teeth bared in what was most likely a smile.

"It seems as though you were correct, Arnold." The man purred, hands drifting to cross in front of his chest. His voice was melodious and gentle in the hallway, caramel colored eyes glinting in the overhead lights.

"Yes, sir. He remembers. I can't be sure how well or how much, due to his running away of course, but he is more promising than anyone we've seen yet," Arnold paused, took a step back and considered the taller man before him. "Does he interest you, sir?"

The man's smile extended to half of a grin and without another word he vanished, trace remnants of the black smoke filtering down from where he once stood. Arnold clapped his hands together and raised them to his face, unable to hide his excitement once the other man was gone.

"I'll take that as a wholehearted 'yes!' What a wonderful night we have ahead of us!" He turned on the heels of his shoes and continued down the hallway, whistling loudly and with gusto.

OoOoOoO

Despite realizing full and well that it was the exact path he traced the previous day…the same day? The day that he was pretty sure he'd already done but was now, for some reason, doing again- regardless of the fact that he was definitely not doing well, Will stumbled out of the elevator to the buffet area. He was simultaneously disappointed and frustrated that breakfast was already being removed, that he had once again lost several hours, and that the person who he knew was saving him a bagel was excitedly waving him over.

"I swear to god if that man has an everything bagel-,"

"Hey! Over here! I saved you a-," But Will was already turning and shuffling as fast as his stooped body could and would take him past the buffet and the confused staff member and down the hallway that would inevitably lead him to the bar. Because if he was going to get some sort of handle on this situation he was going to need as much whiskey as his hands (and a bucket) could carry.

He pushed his way quickly to the bar the moment he entered, ignoring the irritated patrons as he squished his body into the smallest of gaps between two cruisegoers who may or may not have been in the middle of an argument.

"Oh hey, dog guy!"

"Yes, it is I, the dog guy. Please, please give me-,"

"Whiskey, right?" The voice came from Will's right and he jumped, nearly knocking the patron on the stool to his left who was just reaching for the fruitiest of margaritas. He hadn't been spoken to by anyone but the bartender yesterday.

"Er, yes. Whiskey. And you can forget the rocks this time around. And make the glass bigger. Please." He kept his eyes on the bartender who, rather than launch into the conversation from the previous day, had glanced at the man Will could only see out of the corner of his eye, and had silently begun preparing his full glass of whiskey. The drink was handed to him with little more than a nod, and a glance at his hand showed that he had not been gifted with the woman's number and found a tiny part of him disappointed and wondering if the stranger beside him had had anything to do with this shift in events. Will took several burning gulps of his drink, draining the glass nearly halfway, before he turned to the man who was now looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

The man was handsome, of course, which only made Will wish he'd somehow ingested the entirety of the glass in that gulp a few moments ago. And dressed to the nines. The blue in his suit brought out the gentle tan in his skin and only served to emphasize the well-combed hair and gentle demeaner. Will tried to stop ogling the man but the whiskey had gone straight to his pants and he found himself wishing that the man was both further away and closer all the same time-

Will blinked, flabbergasted with himself and mumbled some excuse as he pulled himself free of the over-crowded bar and stumbled into the hallway where he took a moment for himself to just breathe. He leaned against the wall and brought the relatively cool glass to his cheek in

an attempt to cool his heated skin. Try as he might, Will could not remember ever reacting to a person so strongly or so quickly in his life.

Rather than dwell on it, he pushed free of the wall and headed to the deck.

Whatever hope he'd held out that he was just having some weird, extended sort of déjà vu was thrown overboard the moment he spotted the same crewmember as before fielding the shrill shouts of the same drunk passenger as before. He waited only moments before drinking most of what remained in his glass and dropping it on the woman's bared toes. Her wails were louder than the previous day and hazily Will remembered he'd had an ice cube in his glass when he'd dropped it near her last time. The woman hobbled away, aided by their much more sober companion, leaving Will with the amused and relived crewmember. Before they could begin offering him an entire year's worth of drink tickets he held up his hand.

"Listen, this might sound kind of weird, but who could I talk to about the engine trouble we're currently having?" The person blinked and tilted their head, registering what he'd said before choosing to respond.

"You would probably want the engineers but they're down below right now working on the engine and won't be back up until this evening. If you give me your room number I can have them call you when they're available to chat?" They looked more curious than hopeful that he would take their advice and did not seem at all perturbed when he shook his head, thanked them for their time, and turned back toward the lobby where the elevator was just letting off a new slew of people onto the deck. He was only entirely embarrassed when he saw the man from the bar step off behind the loud and sunburned family. Will was thinking he might have been too drunk for this when the man caught his gaze, smiled in a way that was not entirely friendly, and began to walk towards him.

Will was definitely too drunk for this. He raised his gaze to the cloudless blue sky, asked for forgiveness, and barreled past the man and the family and nearly dove into the elevator. He paused only for a moment while he contemplated his sudden irrational and insane behavior as he mashed the door to close the elevator. He kept his body pressed as tightly as possible against the wall of the elevator in a desperate attempt to become invisible. When finally the doors slid silently shut he relaxed and pressed the button that would take him as low as the elevator would go. At this point, he was certain he was still dreaming. That he must still be asleep. The booze that had so suddenly hit his system was now leaving his head felling fuzzy and pounding and he wondered when the last time he'd had anything remotely hydrating.

OoOoOoO

Looking altogether perplexed and feeling frustration for the first time in years, the sharp-dressed man pivoted and stared at the elevator, head cocked gently to the side. This was the first time he had revealed himself in any form to any human in far too long to remember and he wasn't sure what to make of this human in particular. The man, whose true name he had forgotten but whom Arnold affectionately referred to as "Hannibal" when they were alone, was not sure what he should do. He had felt something, downstairs at the bar, when he'd appeared at the man's side. Something…

Different.

Something that called to a part of him he'd thought long dead or gone or buried or lost at sea.

But it was clear that the man was disoriented. Distracted and confused or perhaps even a little bit afraid. Whatever was happening in that man's mind, Hannibal reasoned as he pondered the closed elevator doors before him, there was much work to be done. The man, Hannibal decided, was not yet ready. It would have been asking for the moon and stars for that to be the case. Even he, the king of all he saw and master of reality in this slice of the universe, had needed some preparation and time before he'd truly come into himself. He paused in the midst of what might have become a reverie into his past and turned his attention back to the matter at hand. Yes, this man with the messy hair and too much stubble was definitely going to be trouble.

And trouble was exactly what Hannibal needed.

OoOoOoO

Will's thoughts continuously returned to the mystery man as he watched the floors light up on his way down. The elevator stopped and started as others joined him and left him on his way down, none staying long enough to question the silent, brooding man in the corner. Why hadn't Will seen the man before? He was absolutely certain that he would remember the man with the riveting eyes and perfect hair and yet, racking his brain produced zero results. How had he found Will so quickly up on deck?

Will flushed and ran a hand through already messy hair. Why he thought the man was looking specifically for him, he couldn't say. Coincidentally meeting with him twice in such a short span of time was curious at best and yet, somehow, Will had a feeling that the man had been looking for him. Will shuddered with the stop of the elevator on the lowest of decks and disembarked with a single elderly woman who, based on her Bingo related headwear (an enormous hat topped by a clear ball the size of her head that said 'Step Aside Losers' emblazoned in pink glittery letters) was off to sweep the tables of an underground bingo tournament. His gaze roved the hallways to his left and right before alighting on the rough map of the ship's interior he'd been searching for.

"Should be a service entrance somewhere down this hallway." He muttered under his breath, finger tracing the relatively simple path on the map that he would need to take. As he about-faced and made his way purposefully down the mostly empty hallway Will wondered what, exactly, his plan was. He had no idea what he was doing or where he was going. He knew only that something was wrong here and he needed to do something about it. If only for his sanity; keeping his body moving was just another way to try and keep his brain moving. He was still holding out hope for waking up suddenly and finding that they were almost at their next port city.

By the time he reached the "Crewmembers Only" sign on the door he was hoping would lead him to the bowels of the ship he was well and truly regretting the whiskey he'd had earlier. Whether it was the adrenaline or the fact that he'd pretty much been doing nothing but drinking during his entire vacation, he was now left feeling shaky, ready for a nap, and sporting the worst case of dry mouth he could ever remember having. Will glanced both ways and, while the hallways remained clear, he tugged on the handle and-

Was entirely surprised when it opened for him.

The dumbfounded FBI empath stood there, mouth slightly agape, for nearly a full thirty seconds before dashing inside and gently shutting the door behind him. Regardless of what he had intended when he'd entered the elevator, he had not expected to get this far. He had been certain that someone, anyone, would stop him to ask questions or lead him to the Bingo tournament. And at the very least he had expected that surely the super-secret door intended only for the crew to use would have been locked.

The butterfly that had been lurking in his belly was quickly becoming a maelstrom of birds roiling in his gut as he glanced left and right and left and right to ensure that there was nobody nearby. He saw no one and heard nothing and after a few somewhat indecisive seconds, Will headed down the corridor in search of stairs or an elevator or any other mode of transportation that would take him down. After a few moments of looking around, the consultant realized that subconsciously it seemed he was following a sound. He paused in the hallway, frowning as he listened to the noise, before realizing that every second not moving was another one closer to being caught.

After what felt like an eternity but was more like three and a half minutes of walking down confusing corridors and peeking in curiously stationed doorways along said corridor, Will found a door marked "Stairs" and was again confused to find the door unlocked. The sound was significantly louder here, and Will was certain that it could only be some kind of machinery. The hairs along the back of his neck and arms were starting to rise and alarms were beginning to sound in his head as he quietly opened the door and slid inside.

If there had been any doubt as to the origin of the sound, it was dispelled the moment he had stepped through the door. He quietly shut the door behind him and, hoping that he wasn't making a huge mistake, headed towards the sound. The noise led him to a metallic staircase that headed down and while the part of him that loved horror movies was telling him to leave, run away right this second, he knew he could not turn back after having come this far.

He took a breath.

He steadied himself.

And he started down the staircase.

It did not take long for him to fully regret his decision; roughly the amount of time it took him to arrive at the source of the mechanical cacophony. His eyes roved over the catwalk that spread out from the end of the staircase and he winced at the thought of being over the source of the racket but saw no other way to get a better look.

"What the fuck...," He muttered as he walked slowly to the railing that overlooked what was definitely not the typical engine room of a typical cruise ship. Gazing out over the rail, hands gripping the metal tight enough to whiten his knuckles, Will found himself simultaneously dumbfounded and confused. Now, Will was very much aware that he was not an engineer. Nor had he ever served on a cruise ship, or any kind of ship for that matter. But he was fairly certain that there could not possibly be any kind of ship that required what looked to be an enormous vat filled with frightening machinery moving at a speed he could not follow. An

occasional spark flew from the depths of it and he wondered if this could be safe in any way, shape, or form. Surrounding it were twelve much smaller, much safer looking covered components that looked a lot closer to what modern engines should look like. Or at least, what he thought they should look like.

Ignoring the screeching terror in his head, he leaned ever so slightly over the edge, eyes squinting and lips parting just slightly and eyebrows knitting together in a look that was entirely confusion.

“Do you like it?” Will’s heart nearly leapt from his chest as he whirled to find that he was no longer alone. Silently he cursed himself for not watching his back but found he could not wholeheartedly blame himself for not hearing anyone approaching over the sound of the machine beneath him. Standing behind him, wearing the same dark blue suit he’d spotted him in earlier that day, was the handsome stranger that it seemed was definitely following him.

“I don’t even know what ‘it’ is, to be honest.” He managed after a moment of silence.

“It’s how we travel. I will tell you more. Soon. But not yet. It’s too early to tell you, I think. Mr. Graham-,” Will blanched and backed further into the railing, his hands gripping the rail behind him. How the hell did he know his name?

“Mr. Graham, you are quite a unique creature. You seem to have caught on to the fact that things are not exactly as they seem. Tell me; how did it feel? When Arnold threw you overboard last night? Were you frightened?” The man’s eyes shone as he began walking, no, stalking towards Will who remained inexplicably frozen in place.

“Did you expect to wake up again? Were you surprised? Confused?” Will could not physically press himself into the railing any further and found himself incapable of speaking as the man came closer and closer. Within seconds he was standing just before him, so close Will could feel the heat coming from him. Could see the diamond-shaped design that nearly blended into his suit. And still he remained frozen as he man’s hand reached out towards his face, his head cocked to the side and what looked like a smirk playing on his lips. Behind him, Will could hear, could feel the creaking of the guardrail behind him and he wondered just how often maintenance came to look at the room down here.

Despite the fact that Will had no idea what was going on.

Despite the fact that Will was absolutely terrified.

Despite the fact that Will had never ached to feel the touch of another human being so badly as in any singular moment.

Despite all of this, Will could not stop what was not a conscious decision as he jerked away, backwards, and with just enough force to destroy what little remained of the corroding metal holding his section of the railing together. The moment happened in slow motion, as it had seemed to with Arnold the other night. The fence gave way and he was tumbling backwards through the air and out of reach of the man with the perfect hair and wolfish, hungry eyes. The man’s arm was still outstretched, reaching towards a face that was no longer there,

though the man's eyes followed his own. He watched as Will plummeted towards the machinery, his smirk slowly disappearing and something akin to confusion replacing it.

Will knew little else beyond the white hot and instantaneous pain as he slammed into the churning metal monster and was gone.

OoOoOoO

From above, Hannibal could see it all happening. Could hear the fence giving out as the man jerked away from his touch. And yet, as William crashed through the fence and landed squarely in the center of their most essential and ruthless machine, only to disappear seconds later in an explosion of blood and definitely accompanied by the sounds of bones crunching, there was only one thing he could think to say.

"Magnificent."

In Which Things Are Most Assuredly NOT Fine

Chapter Notes

Please see the end of the chapter for some long-ass notes and sort of apology?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Under most circumstances, upon awakening from a frightening dream or breaking free of a night terror, Will Graham would awake with a loud gasp and soaked in sweat. This was a common occurrence in his life, something he had grown accustomed to, even used to, over the years. Strange or terrifying dreams happened routinely enough that his dogs no longer barked or whined and instead greeted him only with kisses and comfort no matter the time of night it happened.

What Will had never done before, however, was screech like a banshee and fling himself out of his bed and onto the floor. One hard thump to the ground later and, disoriented and terrified, Will was scrambling backwards and trying to stand all in one fell swoop. He paused only when his back hit the wall, gasping and wide-eyed and wondering why he was breathing at all. Before he could deal with the possible ramifications of no longer having a body, he forced himself to look down and timidly touched his torso and arms and legs. Once he was certain that each of his limbs was there and accounted for, he focused on slowing his heart rate, fearing a heart attack if it continued racing and pounding like it was.

As Will calmed himself, the pain returned.

He gasped, doubled over with the phantom pain of being ripped apart by ruthless machinery. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes and he swallowed a sob as the memory of his second death in as many days resurfaced vividly and violently. The pain began slowly to fade as he regained control of himself. He allowed himself the time he needed to return to the moment, to fully awake and come to his senses. Moving slowly, as gingerly as though he were physically injured, Will stood and made his way towards the bathroom. In much the same manner as the previous two mornings he slid into the icy shower, hoping that the sudden sensation would bring him back to his senses. Because despite the fact that his brain was desperately trying to convince him that he'd just had another horrific dream and none of that had actually happened, Will knew otherwise.

What was going on was otherworldly and sincerely fucked but it was happening, whatever *it* was. At this point, he could either lose his mind and go to pieces or try to figure out how the hell to get out of here. For a moment, as he leaned his head against the cool tile amidst the rapidly heating water in his shower, he considered falling apart. He considered losing himself and just giving up or giving in or doing whatever was necessary to avoid dying *again*. His throat closed up as tears pricked the corner of his eyes and gently, very gently, he tapped his forehead against the wall.

“Fuck that, though.” He muttered, running his hands through wet hair and pulling himself together. Will was nothing if not a fighter and whatever the hell was messing with him had another thing coming if it thought he was just going to give up without a fight.

He paused as he shut the water off and groped for his towel. There had been someone new yesterday. A new addition to the crew that he hadn’t noticed in the days leading up to this horrific Groundhog Day-esque experience he was having. He tried to remember, pushing past the fall and the pain and searching for that face, the last one he’d seen before he fell to his death. Try as he might, he could only remember the suit, the sapphire blue with the gentle pattern and the immaculate undershirt beneath. Something about that suit, that man (for he was sure it had been a man) did something to him and he was unhappy to find himself somehow aroused by the thought of his face being the last thing he saw…even if he couldn’t remember it.

Something fucked up was *definitely* going on.

Dressed and determined to do some more sleuthing and not die this time around, Will flung open the door to his room and was only slightly annoyed that the man with his stupid drinks was still there. It was like his day could not begin without ruining someone else’s.

“Listen I’m sorry but you have to stop being here every morning.”

“What the hell are you-,”

“Just pick up your cups this time, okay?” The man glared hazy daggers at him and pointedly left the spilled glasses where they lay before stumbling on down the hallway. Was it Will’s imagination or did he seem…drunker than he had before?

“My goodness, what’s going on here?” The hairs along the back of Will’s neck rose at Arnold’s voice and he spun on his heel to face the man who looked like the cat that got the cream.

“Nothing.”

“Oh, nothing? Just out for a morning walk with your best friend, Alcohol?” Will bit his tongue and strode past Arnold, ignoring the hurt expression on his face as he brushed past the other man.

“Hey hey! I was just kidding, Will. I-I wanted to know if maybe you’d want to have dinner with me? Tonight? I’ll pay!” Will paused in his steps, shuddering and wondering truly if he was losing his mind. Without turning he shook his head.

“Sorry, Arnold. I’m really not feeling well. I’ll catch up with you later, okay?” He continued on his path, ignoring the wounded man left behind in his path.

Arnold’s expression changed from one of hurt to one of sheer elation the moment Will was out of sight. Whatever Hannibal had done the night before had had even more of an effect on the man than Arnold could have anticipated! He would have been lying if he’d said he wasn’t absolutely thrilled. Unlike the “previous” morning, Hannibal did not appear beside him and

Arnold could barely contain himself with thoughts of where the King might be at this very moment. Whistling the same jaunty tune as before, he turned and started languidly down the hallway, wondering what more help he might be to his King and how much longer they would have to wait.

OoOoOoO

Will had already tried going to the buffet area, and while his constitution growled for the sweet relief of some alcohol, he had a feeling he needed to break his routine. Rather than head up, he headed further into the ship, ignoring the sinking feeling of unsettlement the closer to the center he got. All the while his mind whirred, trying to think of how he could get this ship moving or how he could leave or how he could do anything other than just relive this day again. He thought briefly of the engine room and shuddered as he remembered the machine that had chewed him up and turned him into ground human. Will figured he would end up there again, one way or another, but he was hoping that it would be the last thing he tried.

A flash of red caught his eye and Will froze, whirling in place and terrifying the couple that had been passing him in the hallway. He could swear, just in that room he'd passed-

He backtracked and tried not to look freaked out as he looked through the window of what appeared to be some kind of small souvenir shop and saw that he had not, in fact, been mistaken. The man that he remembered from the night before, the one who had found him in the engine room, stood just inside, arms folded and leaning against the wall as though he had not a care in the world. He appeared otherwise engaged with the person behind the counter, suit a deep crimson today, and Will couldn't seem to pull himself away.

Until the man turned and stared him down.

Will was down the hallway and heading to the elevator as fast as his legs could take him, terrified and prepared to fight as a fresh wave of adrenaline kicked in. He hadn't turned to see if he was followed and found that he could not, for fear that the man would be right behind him.

As he turned the corner and came to the small lobby where the elevators were, he gasped in relief to see the doors just opening and a small group of people spilling out. Forgetting any and all semblance of manners he pushed past the bunch and nearly threw himself into the elevator just as the doors were closing behind him. For a moment he allowed himself to breathe, chest on fire as he slammed the button that would lead him topside. Whatever was going on in the bowels of this ship were too much for him to handle; whether or not that man had actually been there was currently up for debate but what mattered was getting ahold of himself.

"You seem a little jumpy, Will. Anything I can do to alleviate some of your worries?" Will nearly jumped out of his skin at the smooth purring voice of the man from last night. He whirled and pressed himself against the back of the elevator's somewhat worn wallpaper and wondered what he had done in his life to deserve this.

The man was beautiful and alluring in a way that no person had the right to be. His face was lean, wolf-like and regal. Hazel eyes, hue shifting between green and brown as though they were molten pools of color, caught and held Will's gaze. The area they were stuck in was small and Will caught a whiff of some kind of cologne that was intoxicating and rich and he hated himself for feeling a surge of that same arousal from before as the man started to close the distance between them.

"Listen, I don't know who you are or what you want,"

"Hannibal."

"What?" Will managed, train of thought momentarily derailed as the man pressed in close enough for their shirts to touch.

"You may call me Hannibal. I do not offer this name lightly, William, and I expect you to behave accordingly." To say that Will was stunned or confused would have been an understatement. To have a stranger, and a dangerous one at that, so close was making his fight or flight instincts kick in. Time seemed to have slowed around them and Will was certain he would never reach the top deck. The man leaned in closer and inhaled, his nose close enough for Will to feel the slight puff of air against his skin. He shuddered.

"You smell like dessert, William. Did you know that?" The flush that crossed Will's cheeks was nothing less than embarrassing as he pressed closer to the wall, ignoring the groans the metal made as his movement.

"Listen, *Hannibal*, I don't know who you are or what the hell is going on here but I'm starting to think that maybe I'm not going insane… You were there yesterday, weren't you? Er, today? Whatever, you were there. When I-When I fell." The man Will knew now as Hannibal smiled, all teeth and frightening in the small space and cocked his head slightly to the side but said nothing in response. Something like fire was burning in the man's eyes and Will wasn't sure if he was supposed to be aroused or terrified.

"So you do remember."

"If you mean my untimely plummeting to my death and subsequent obliteration at the hands of whatever the hell that machine was then, yes, I do remember." Will shuddered with phantom pain as his mind tried to suppress the fresh memory.

"Absolutely fascinating. You're the first human I've seen that remembered. That could tell that things here are…different." Before Will could even begin processing that statement his brain stuttered to a halt; Hannibal was reaching out in the same gesture as the night prior. The scruffy man froze as Hannibal's hand came to rest on his cheek, tilting his face up and towards the light to clear away the shadows from the poor lighting. Will tried to imagine that his face wasn't burning and that he didn't exactly hate the feeling of being touched so intimately by someone that had just called him a human with the implication being that Hannibal was not.

"I'm pretty sure that I'm in some kind of hospital right now. I'm either in some kind of coma or maybe I'm on death's door. Maybe this is all a dream. None of this is happening. None of

this makes sense."

"Oh? And how are you so sure? Tell me, do dreams cause pain, William?" The man's hand traveled loosely, lightly down to Will's neck and before Will could even blink, he was being lifted from the floor. Will kicked and clawed at the man's hand as his airways constricted and he gasped and chocked for air.

"Do you suffocate often in your dreams, Will? Or just wish you did? Do you feel that? Can you feel yourself getting light-headed? Can you feel my hand crushing the life out of you?" Will's face was turning red then purple and yes, he was starting to feel light-headed. Just as the edges of his vision were beginning to go black the man released him to fall to the floor. Will collapsed, gasping and choking and grabbing at his neck; he felt that his chest was red-hot and going to burst. He wasn't sure how long he sat there, gasping for air and gagging on nothing, eyes closed and red-rimmed before he was able to open them again. He'd expected the man to have left, for the elevator to have opened, for someone to be offering him a hand. What he got was that same man, crouched down in front of him, watching him choke with what was probably the most intense pair of icy eyes Will had ever seen.

Will jerked away and nearly smashed his head against the wall as the man reached out again and cupped his face in too-warm hands.

"You are truly a fascinating creature, William." Hannibal's left hand drifted from Will's scruffy cheek down to his throat where Will absolutely knew that there would be one hell of a bruise. And before Will could even comprehend how close they were the man's lips were hovering and then pressed against his own. Will could feel his brain short circuiting as the man (?) who referred to himself as Hannibal used his right hand against Will's cheek to tilt his chin up, allowing him to deepen the kiss into something far from chaste. Will's throat burned, wind wheezing through his chest and despite the pain he found himself incapable of pushing the man away. His face and neck and arms and body were hot from the man's touches and somehow the pain of his throat made everything so much…sweeter.

Will's hands drifted up, forward, reaching out as though he meant to bring Hannibal in closer. His hands grazed the lapels of Hannibal's impeccable suit-

And just as quickly as it began it was done.

He blinked, an instantaneous biological reaction, and found himself alone in the elevator. His eyes glanced up to where the floor indicator was once again lighting up and he could feel the subtle shift of movement that the elevator was once again moving. It slid slowly to a stop and with a ding, the doors slid open to reveal two ridiculously handsome young men holding hands. And staring at him. And moving towards him. The look in their eyes suggested that he looked worse than he felt.

"Hey… Hey are you okay? Do you need some help?" One of them was pressing the button to keep the elevator door open while the other slowly approached Will, crouching just enough to be on a level field with him. The young man had his hand held out towards Will and, after he glanced to the other man holding the doors open, he grasped the proffered hand. Will winced as he pulled himself up and leaned almost immediately against the wall, doing his best to ignore the concerned the looks the men were giving him.

“Not to sound too much like an asshole but you look horrible, sir. Who did this to you? Do you want us to call security?”

“Yeah there’s a phone right out in the lobby there,” The soft-spoken man at the doors said, eyes roving Will’s face. “If there’s someone that violent on this ship we need to alert the crew.” Will was already shaking his head. The man who’d offered his hand to Will leaned forward to better inspect Will’s neck. Will cleared his throat and leaned away from the man.

“I think,” He managed, whispering and wincing at the rawness of his throat. “I think I’m okay. I mean, maybe after a drink I’ll be a little better. I didn’t really get a look at the guy, though.” He offered a small half-smile and started to walk towards the doors.

“Well…do you want to join us for some drinks or something?”

“Come on Sam, I’m sure he doesn’t want-,”

“If he doesn’t want to he doesn’t have to, but he just said he needed a drink and if he’s alone maybe he doesn’t want to drink alone.” Sam, at the doors, and the other man who’d helped him up had locked gazes and were having an intense conversation entirely with exasperated gazes. Will smiled lopsidedly and waved them both off as he exited the elevator. Thus, staggering free of the elevator, Will missed the meaningful and intense look the two shared, a gaze that suggested that Will’s entire presence was wrong here at this time.

“I’ll be okay, thank you. I’ve got somewhere I need to be, so if you’ll excuse me…”

“Well hey, I’m Jonah and that’s Sam and if you’re feeling a little unsettled or anything we’re going to be going to that 80’s dance party thing at 11,” Jonah smiled. “We hope to see you there, hm?”

“Jonah that’s an employee party, you can’t just invite random passengers-,”

“I can if those random passengers look like they need a little bit of a pick-me-up, Sam.”

Will nodded and offered a little wave as the elevator doors slid shut behind him. Now free of the elevator and able to take in more than a slight wheeze of air, Will wondered what his next step ought to be. He’d, thus far, been unable to find the engine room without guidance; perhaps finding a crew member might get him to where he needed to be?

Just as he was contemplating which way he should go, he saw the crewmember from the previous mornings, the one being berated by the drunk lady on the top deck, come in from the deck looking absolutely dejected. They shuffled forward and nearly walked past him before he remembered their comment about the engineers.

“Hey! Excuse me, excuse me.” He jogged after them as they made for a door that said “staff only” on it. He just managed to stop them, knocking them out of their stupor as they turned to gaze at him first with the over whelming “what now” look heavy in their eyes and then with a confusion that was so intense Will took a step back and away from them. He paused for a moment, hand raised in his attempt to grab their attention, before lowering it and hoping he hadn’t appeared threatening.

“What are…what are you doing here?” They managed after a moment of dumbfounded silence, during which their eyes searched over every inch of Will.

“I…I was looking for some help?” He ventured, eyebrow raised as he wondered if, perhaps, his interruption this morning while the crewmember dealt with shrill lady had been missed? Surely not; wasn’t everyone part of this time loop thing?

“Of-Of course sir!” They seemed to go through a momentary reset, eyes flickering to life and hands coming to clasp almost daintily in front of their chest. “What can I help you with? Were you- Were you looking for drink tickets? I’m fresh out of those, I’m afraid but I might be able to-,”

“Oh, no no. That’s not it. I was wondering if there was someone who is in charge of the engines might have some time to speak with a curious cruise-goer?”

“Why ever for, sir?”

“Oh, I’m just feeling a little restless,” He smiled and hoped the look was charming and not frightening. “I was hoping to keep myself occupied and away from the people. They’ve been a little louder than usual today, I think.” The crewmember smiled and nodded sagely as though thoroughly understanding what he meant when he said that.

“Yes, I’ve noticed people being a little more…irritable than usual I suppose. It’s been pretty hectic in the public areas. Maybe I can find someone to help us out?” They smiled, dazzlingly, and started back towards the “crew only” door they’d originally been walking toward. Will started forward, unsure as to whether he was meant to follow, but as they reached the door they turned and shook their head.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you in here; if you’d give me your room number I’ll call you when I’ve worked something out for you. Is that all right?” Frankly, no, it was not alright, but it was not like Will had any choice in the matter. He returned was he, again, was hoping was a dazzling smile and not a nervous baring of the teeth and nodded.

“No problem; I’m on deck-,”

“That won’t be necessary, Devan.” Will’s blood ran cold and the hair along the back of his neck stood on end as he heard the familiar voice of Arnold just behind him. He turned quicker than was polite and backed out of easy reach, knowing full and well that distance would be nothing to whatever the hell was masquerading as a handsome tour guide.

“Oh, Arnold! I didn’t see you there.” Will would have had to be blind to miss the look passed between them as Arnold stared down the crewmember named Devan as they stood with the door held open.

“Oh not to worry, Devan, I know. I’ll take it from here, alright?” Another dazzling smile and Will’s empty belly was churning. Devan nodded and eased through the door, allowing it to shut silently behind them leaving Will standing in the lobby with only Arnold as company.

“So, Will, feeling better?”

“Cut the bullshit, Arnold.” Will growled, arms taut and prepared at his side.

“Language, Will! What have I don’t to warrant such cruel words?”

“Besides throw me overboard after the best steak dinner of my life? Not much I suppose,” Arnold paused in the midst of his pacing and cocked his head in response before Will continued. “I’m guessing it’s unusual for someone to remember, right? But you don’t look shocked, you look…delighted. It’s actually making me feel a little sick. Looking at you, I mean.”

“I suppose there wouldn’t be much use to denying any of it, right?” Will laughed in response to Arnold’s sighed comment.

“No, I don’t suppose there would be.” Will turned sharply, eyes glinting and angry as his arms stiffened at his sides.

“Does that mean I get to ask what the hell is going on and get a straight answer from you?” Arnold shrugged and leaned against the wall behind him, arms crossed over his chest and eyes dark.

“Nobody’s stopping you, Will.”

“Alright,” Will sighed. “So, then what the hell is going on here?”

“Something that’s been going on for a very, very, very long time. Longer, in fact, than even we are aware of. What is time, even, William? Truly there is no telling as to when or how this all began.”

“Don’t give me that shit, Arnold-,” Will’s words were lost as Arnold was suddenly backing Will against the wall. Will blanched and stumbled backwards nearly tripping as he backed away from Arnold’s sudden and insistent pursuit.

“Listen, sweetheart,” Arnold reached out and Will flinched, but the man was adjusting, playing, with his collar. “You aren’t ready for the truth. And I’m not trying to sound like some movie villain or a comic book plot line. Your mind literally cannot handle what is happening right now.” Arnold’s hand drifted from Will’s collar up, trailing up the side of his neck before his hand came to rest cradling Will’s cheek. The man smiled and the whites of his teeth shone out brightly and beautifully against his dark skin.

“You’ll get there, Will! You’ll get there. In fact, each day is bringing you a step closer to the truth. You can feel that that’s right, can’t you? You can feel that you’re changing. It may not feel like much at first. But you’ll remember more and more. You’ll remember the pain. You’ll remember.”

“What the hell does that mean, Arnold?”

“Oh don’t worry about it, William,” Arnold’s smile widened as he stepped back away from Will. “Hannibal will help you understand.” Without another word, Arnold turned on his heel and sauntered away, heading down a hallway whistling and with a bounce in his step. Will,

feeling suddenly very light-headed, sagged against the wall behind him and tried to get his rapid heartbeat under control. The power he'd felt, the overwhelming knowledge that Arnold could have ripped him in half, was not what had him so shaken.

Rather, it was the idea that Arnold answered to someone. And not just any someone, but to the man that up until this point Will was believing he was just inventing. He stood still for some time, watching as people wandered in and out, using the elevator and laughing without a care in the world, and some part of him wondered what the hell he had done to deserve this. Once he'd finished having his pity-party for one, Will pushed off the wall and strode confidently towards the "staff only" door. He might be going down with this ship but, damn it, he didn't have to take it lying down.

Without thinking he threw the door open and barged in, ignoring the surprised gasp of a couple people just inside. His eyes glanced down to the ID cards of each member of the crew as he walked past them, consistently disappointed as none of them read "Engineer." If he wasn't going to get help from the other members of the crew, then he would find the engineers himself and get some damn answers about what was happening with the engines.

OoOoOoO

Breathing heavily and limping, using the wall as a support, Will was thinking that maybe he was sensing some kind of pattern here. He hoped that he was imagining the sound of footsteps just behind him but did his best to increase his pace down the dimly lit hallway. Will grit his teeth against the pain and focused only on rounding the corner that was coming up. The elevators were close now and if he could just-just get there he might be alright.

"William." Will shuddered against the wall and felt his legs give out, spilling him onto the carpeted hallway. The pain was inescapable; his hand remained clenched at his stomach and he refused to look at what was undoubtable his insides on the outside. He felt as though he'd been gutted and the excessive blood trail he'd left behind seemed only to concur with his findings. Sweat beaded and dripped from his chin as he used his free right hand to drag himself along the carpeting, shuddering and gasping and loosing strangle cries of pain as he moved.

"Please, William, don't ignore me. I am not fond of being ignored." The voice was closer and despite having not heard the man approach Will knew if he turned around the man who called himself Hannibal would be standing just behind him. He continued onward, doggedly ignoring the presence of the single most intimidating man he had ever encountered. It wasn't until he felt the tugging and realized he wasn't moving forward any more that he was forced to finally turn around. Hannibal had his foot squarely on Will's calf and before Will could even begin to form the words for a plea the resounding crack of a snapped bone echoed in the hallway. Pain shot up from the wound and Will had to bite back a howl of pain as the man contemplated him with burning eyes.

"What do you want? What do you want from *me*?" Will managed through gritted teeth; the edges of his vision were beginning to go black and whether from blood loss or pain he could not be sure. The only thing he could be sure of, at this point, was that this was the end of the rope.

“This is not the end, Will. It has never been, nor will it ever be,” Will struggled to swallow his fear and kept his gaze stead on the man as Hannibal walked around from his now useless leg and crouched just in front of his face. “In fact, Will, this is just the beginning. You don’t see it now, and though I see the hatred in your eyes and the fear in your heart, you will see soon enough.” The man smiled and Will spit on his shoes, rebellion strong in his dying heart. The man reached forward with a hand still dripping blood Will knew to be his and cupped Will’s cheek. Hannibal’s thumb rubbed along Will’s stubble, smearing the blood across his skin.

“Just let go, Will. There’s no reason to hold on so tightly.” Will’s shuddering gasps were coming slower and slower and as Hannibal withdrew his hand Will’s head dropped to the ground, lacking the strength to keep even his head up.

“You’re a monster.” Will managed, mumbling into the sodden carpet as he eyes began to glaze over and lose focus.

“So are you.” The words, whispered with lips against the shell of his ear, were the last things he heard as Will sank into darkness-

OoOoOoO

Only to awaken in his room. Again. Will resisted the urge to scream and instead set about freeing himself from his tangled up, sweat-soaked bedsheets. He had died three times now, that much he knew was truth; there could be no more doubt about it. But he found himself stumped as to the how and why. Scenes from *Groundhog Day* floated through his mind and Will was beginning to wonder if he’d found himself trapped in a similar situation. He was out of the shower, laughing at himself, and slamming the door to his room open and knocking over the fool with the drinks as it registered with him that perhaps the idea of being trapped in a time loop wasn’t the craziest thing in the world.

“No, the craziest thing in the world is that psychotic monster who has it out for me for some reason,” He mumbled, glancing at the man with the drinks who was stumbling away, before ducking back into his room. “But I sure as hell am not going to take this laying down.” He bolted the door behind him and began to formulate a plan. Regardless of what was going on, he was tired of being murdered. If he wasn’t going to have luck finding someone to help fix the engine he would just have to do it himself. And hopefully not end up in that room with the enormous human sized grinder that had already killed him.

Having wandered the ship more than once over at this point and having gone through several doors marked “off limits,” Will was able to draw a relatively crude but fairly accurate approximation of the ship’s layout on the series of napkins he’d found in the bottom of his dresser drawer. His plan was simple: Make it to the engine room undetected and hopefully get the ship running again.

OoOoOoO

Will sighed, forefinger still resting in his mouth and the taste of blood still on his tongue, head leaning against the cool metal wall behind him as he considered other options. He’d made it to the engine room, roughly, by day 23. Within those days alone he had been:

• Stabbed
• Drowned
• Grounded down into hamburger meat
• Poisoned
• Strangled
• Stabbed again
• Exploded
• Burned alive
• Stabbed AGAIN

There had been many, many more deaths than those recounted; the depravity of his torturers was never-ending it seemed. The problem, despite having discovered the fool-proof way to get to the engine room, was that there didn't seem to be much he was able to accomplish once there. By day 50 he'd been frustrated enough to try and leave the ship and had been met with perhaps the wildest of deaths thus far; suffocation via enormous octopus. It was now day 82 and he remained as clueless as ever as to how he might escape his seemingly inevitable death.

He was feeling pretty "over" the entire situation.

Sadly, William had not arrived in the engine room to find a giant red button that said, "Push to Start Engine." In fact, all he had managed to find was an enormous switchboard that seemed to be entirely for show; he pushed and toggled and flipped everything that had a moving piece and had received nothing for his efforts. And here he sat now, taking apart what he hoped was the control panel in an effort to return power to the wide array of toggles and switches. At this point, finding a death that stuck was enough to keep him going. He had no illusions that he would make it out of whatever this was alive.

"I can smell your frustration, Will." Will's heart leapt directly into his throat and he toppled to the side and away from the sudden and unmistakable sound of expensive shoes on the echoing floor. Damn it, he'd allowed himself to linger too long in one place. After a few weeks Will had learned that the best way to die of more natural causes (his death occurred daily regardless of who was responsible) was to keep on the move. Stay in one place for too long, and he was bound to be found. The demon was like a bloodhound who'd caught Will's scent.

The scruffy man scuttled away from the sound, scrambling to his feet and leaving his knife where he'd thrown it. Will cursed himself for being so lackadaisical; there would be no throwing the demon off now, physically or otherwise.

After a moment or two of scrambling for cover, Will found himself silently gasping behind one of the perpetually dark engines. Sweat beaded on his brow and slid down his cheek as he pressed his back against the cool metal, listening as hard as he could to track the monster's path.

"Can't you feel yourself changing? Can't you feel everything around you changing?" Will's heart beat in time with the man's words, thudding painfully against his chest as he listened. He knew better than to respond. Still, something tickled at the back of his mind, tingling and reaching and stretching his head and thoughts were flooding in that did not feel like his own.

“They are slower, now, the humans aboard this ship. This is, of course, normally a much slower process but…it has been a while for us here. And we are so, so hungry, William.” A shudder coursed through Will’s body, gooseflesh rising on his skin as Hannibal spoke to him. He stifled a groan, then, as pain ripped through his abdomen, settling in his gut as a stabbing, aching, burning *hunger*. Bent over at the waist, teeth gritting so hard he could hear them creaking in his skull, Will gripped at his belly as though he intended to remove it. Never before had he felt such intense and concentrated pain and he had, only days prior, been skinned alive.

“Don’t you feel it? Close your eyes, William,” He closed his eyes. “Breathe, William, just breathe.” The hair on the back of Will’s neck rose and his eyes rolled up in the back of his head, lips parted as his body flattened against the cold metal behind him. The pain was changing, becoming something…new. His hands had moved from his own body to the metal of the ship behind him and to this he gripped tight enough for his knuckles to turn white. All at once he knew he needed *something* and he needed *something fast*. His thoughts were moving farther and farther from his grasp and it felt as though he were shifting into something far more feral and far more dangerous than he could have imagined possible. His lips had drawn away from his teeth and he was snarling-

“You feel it, the same as I do. The same as we all do.” Will’s eyes snapped open, teeth still bared as his chin was tilted up to meet the demon’s eyes. The man leaned forward, and Will smelled fire and matchsticks and smoke and vanilla and chai and heat and a combination of things no one creature should or could ever smell like.

And it smelled like home.

Will growled and lunged forward, desperate for the scent Hannibal exuded. The demon seemed to have anticipated his movements and stepped toward the lunging man rather than away from him. Will was too far gone, too ravenous and lost in Hannibal’s scent to see the smile curling across the demon’s mouth. Hannibal’s arms wrapped around the scruffy man and he stretched his neck to allow Will to inhale. Seconds passed in what felt like minutes as Will’s jaw stretched open and his teeth scraped Hannibal’s bared throat. In whatever was left of his conscious mind Will was able, just barely, to keep himself from breaking the demon’s skin; some part of him was certain this was not the best idea at this moment. Left wanting and confused and aching, teeth points just scraping the demon’s neck, he put together words as well as he could.

“I need-,” he groaned, hands curled into claws and scrabbling for purchase.

“Hush now, William, I know exactly what you need.” Hannibal murmured, hand coming up to gently stroke Will’s sweat-dampened hair out of his face. And then he was pressing Will back against the metal, right leg sweeping Will’s legs apart and pinning him against the metal. Wherever Will’s mind was it certainly wasn’t here as he groaned against Hannibal’s neck, hands groping as though to somehow pull the demon closer despite their bodies now being flush up against each other.

“You can taste it, can’t you? You can smell it on me and *in* me, William. You are almost there,” He pulled Will’s face up, gaze roving over the flushed skin and stubble and glossed over eyes. Hannibal’s lips met Will’s lightly at first, a brush of skin against skin, that sent a

jolt of lightening through Will's skull. Whatever worries or fears or confusions dissolved as Hannibal leaned in again and ran his tongue along Will's lower lip. Will responded with gusto, tongue darting out to meet Hannibal's as he tried desperately to draw the man into a deeper and more intense kiss. Hannibal chuckled and withdrew, eyes once again focusing on Will's.

"Soon…but not yet." Will's sudden desire, pulsing almost violently throughout his body, stuttered to a halt as Hannibal's knife plunged into Will's stomach. The demon dragged the knife to the side and up, the movements strong, decisive and unmistakable in intent as Will was sufficiently gutted. Will made a strangled sound, deep in his throat, as Hannibal removed the knife and supported Will while his legs gave out from under him. Will gasped out, flecks of blood flying from his mouth to speckle the demon's face. Hannibal smiled, tongue darting out to taste what landed on his lips.

"I will watch the light leave your eyes, William, because it is when you are at your most beautiful."

And so, eyes locked with the cool gaze of a being completely unfathomable, Will drifted through his shock into the far too familiar darkness of death.

Chapter End Notes

ALRIGHT. So. First? I had no idea one could or SHOULD respond to comments? I think I was still under the impression that one must be aloof and speak to no one or everyone will hate you? I'm so sorry??? I love each and every one of you and every comment and piece of advice and (honestly) adoration is literally the only thing keeping me going in this story and I can assure you I look forward to interacting more openly with you guys. This has been a difficult set of months. I've learned some awful news, lost some family members, got bronchitis twice... On top of that, I go to school full-time and work 30 hours a week. Finding time for myself, and to do the things I enjoy, is difficult. By the time I get home, my spoons are usually used up or dissolved away.... So any support I get from you guys is literally the best. I'm so sorry my update is so late. I know, for sure, I'll be better when summer gets here but I've at least started the next chapter! I love you all; thank you for joining me on this wild ride.

In Which Things Begin to Click But Are Still Not Fine

Chapter Notes

Guys. Guys. I'm sorry. I love you. More notes at the bottom!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It would take another six days before it finally clicked. Three long, brutal days where death was all Will was able to eat and sleep and breathe, mind apparently melted, before conscious, intelligent thought returned to him. Another three days before he finally understood at least one aspect of the ship that Hannibal had been referring to before when…

Well. Before.

Sitting just out of sight of the main elevators, smoking a cigarette he'd bummed off another passenger, Will watched in silence as the minutes ticked by. He knew that he had roughly twelve minutes to go before Jonah and Sam would show up at the elevators and he fully intended to take them up on their invitation. Despite the apparent fact that the days were resetting for everyone, there had been something lingering at the back of his mind, some notion that, given the right circumstances perhaps, might actually become a full-fledged thought. He took a pull on the cigarette, deep as a sigh, and exhaled long and slow, eyes glittering in the sunlight.

From out of the corner of his eye he watched the passengers as they mingled and walked and bathed in the sun. He knew that if he stayed in this spot for long enough, he'd be hit on twice and would have another ask if they could hide out with him from their family. Will shuddered and leaned further against the wall in the shade, wishing that time would tick faster and bring Sam and Jonah to him. Truly, upon reflection, it had been the guy with the drinks that had started it, those three days prior. He reclined further against the lounge, allowing his hair to flop over into his eyes in an attempt to make himself less approachable, as he allowed his mind to wander briefly to his fateful hallway encounter three days (or three deaths ago; truly the distinction between the two had long ago blurred) prior.

OoOoOoO

Days had passed since Hannibal himself had gutted Will, down in that boiler room. Somehow he knew that time had moved despite his inability to recall the time itself that had passed. He awoke from nightmares he could not remember feeling pain he could not determine the cause of. His chest ached and burned; his head pounded as though he'd had too much to drink. Nausea and dizziness clung to his skin as he emptied the nothing in his gut into the toilet, heaving and gagging on the acidic slime his stomach expelled. For the first time since his meeting with Hannibal in the engine room he was able to return to himself and he was not pleased with what he saw.

Glancing at the mirror had shown only glimpses of a wild-eyed man with darkened circles ringing red rims; was it just his imagination or were his cheeks sallower? Was his skin paler, sicklier looking than when last he looked? A shower and a change out of his miserable, sweat-soaked sleeping shirt left him feeling a little more stable, a little more solid on ground he wished he could fathom. He dropped to the bed and held his head in his hands as he struggled to recall what had happened when he woke up the day after his confrontation with Hannibal. Almost immediately he could feel his stomach begin to burn and he hunched over, arms wrapped tightly around his midsection.

Well this was new.

Considering that, for all intents and purposes, Will had awoken in the same conditions which he would have fallen asleep all those weeks before (with mild hunger and a desire to drink), this sudden and ravenous and overwhelming hunger was not a pleasant change. With this shift in the routine, combined with the haunting image he currently presented, he could no longer pretend that things were not changing. At least, it appeared, that the changes were relegated to him alone. Glancing out the window produced only the same vision of endless blue waters. Nearly cloudless skies, occasional fluffy spots of white dotting the blue, completed the almost idyllic scene. Despite his desperate attempt to stave off the horrific burning sensation in his gut, it continued to rear against him, driving him to hunch further in on himself as he sat on the bed.

Gritting his teeth, knuckles white on hands that gripped knees far too tightly, Will breathed slowly and purposefully. Slowly he fought to regain his balance as he pushed the hunger away and did his best to get a grip on his desire to eat his pillow. It took him some time but eventually he was once again able to move. Which he did. Up and away from the bed and to the door. His hand hovered over the knob for only a moment before he pushed the door open and sighed at the familiar sound of wood on person as the door met with interference.

“I legitimately cannot figure out how this keeps happening. How is it even possible that I can, somehow, always open the door at the right time every fucking day? How is it-,” He froze mid-sentence, shocked into silence. The man, who up until now, had never done anything more than drop his drinks or stagger away while cursing Will’s existence with some sway to his step, was sprawled out on the floor before him. Cups, empty, their contents soaking the carpet beneath Will’s feet, lay just beyond the door but Will could have cared less for where the cups had landed.

“Buddy. Hey, buddy, you alright?” He murmured, crouching low in the hallway, mentally ticking away the seconds before he knew Arnold would show up. The man on the carpet made no sound for what felt like eons and before he knew what he was doing, Will reached out and touched the man’s back. The man stirred beneath his touch and Will sighed in relief; at least he hadn’t killed the man with the door because that would have been more embarrassing than his own foray with the octopus. Small, disoriented-sounding moans, muffled by his face on the carpet, floated up from the prone man. Knowing he had little time left, Will reached out and flipped the man over so he could see his face.

Will recoiled almost immediately, stumbling back up to his feet and backing away from what appeared to be a walking dead man. The man’s face was gaunt, pale and yellowing as though

he'd somehow caught the worst flu known to humankind. He was jaundiced, his mouth gaping open and shut like a fish thrown to dry land. The man's eyes were wide and glassy, empty of thought or light of any kind. Even from where he stood, stock still and pressed as flat as a flatcat against the wall adjacent the man, Will could not deny the subtle pull he felt as he observed the man. Hunger, the everlasting, persistent, overwhelming hunger he'd experienced in his room, was beginning to rise in his gut. Almost at once nausea and the desire to…do something to the man lying prone before him was all that filled his mind for a long, painful moment. His eyes burned and his throat constricted, and he felt his lips part as he watched the man gasp silently for air.

All at once he realized he had moved closer as he watched.

"What the fuck," Will whispered as he regained his composure and sidled away, eyes flicking back and forth between the man on the ground and the corner around which he knew Arnold was soon to stride down. The man on the ground stayed where he was even as Will slid around the opposite corner and dashed down the hallway, circling around to meet back up at the elevators.

It wasn't until Will was safely in the stairwell just next to the elevators (he definitely was not ready to be caught unawares in there again) that he was able to reflect on what had just happened. He was heated; his heart was hammering against his chest and a light sheen of sweat had coated his brow. His hands shook as he wrestled his starvation away, and as the seconds passed, he became more and more convinced that a last-minute bagel was not going to satisfy his ache. For nearly three minutes he stood, shaking in the stairwell and doing his best to regain control of his breathing. His mind felt full of static even as his senses remained on high-alert.

With his left hand firmly on the guardrail Will began mindlessly to climb.

There was no destination in mind; he knew how to avoid the most painful of deaths going the route he was currently traveling. But the sense of despair clawing at the back of his mind was nearly enough for him to sit and wait for the fire that would rage through the stairwell or perhaps to await the drunk couple that would "accidentally" knock him over the landing to break his neck at the bottom of the stairs.

As he languidly made his way towards the deck of the ship, ignoring the many floors in between, Will could not help but furrow his brow and try his damndest to remember what happened after he'd been killed by Hannibal in the boiler room. His memory, up until this moment, had been something he could feel confident in. It was, perhaps, the *only* thing he could be certain of. Yet all he was able to bring forth was-

He froze, doubled over in the stairwell as a fresh wave of hunger rampaged through his worn body. A groan tore through his throat and it took several moments before he was able to regain control of his motor functions. Something like panic was trying to claw its way to the surface and it was taking everything he had in him to contain the fear that he was totally losing control of himself.

"What the hell is happening to me," He whispered, his free hand clutching desperately at his skull as though he might compress his slowly eroding thoughts into something coherent.

“You are changing, Will!” The cheerful response of Arnold was entirely unnecessary and wholly unexpected, and Will responded accordingly; he stumbled and jolted backwards, tripping down the couple of steps he’d only just ascended to the landing below.

“Listen I know you’ve killed me at least 24 times since all of this started but you could at least give a man a warning; I’m not ready for another heart attack.”

“Oh no worries, Will, I’m not here to kill you. Not yet, anyway,” The creature (as Will had come to think of him) grinned widely at him as he stalked towards Will, moving lithely down the stairs. “Oh no I’m just here to check your…progress, as it were. According to my King you are progressing much faster than he anticipated!” Will backed hard up against the wall, hackles raised and teeth bared.

“Oh, a *King* is he? And here I thought he was just some disgusting monster-,” Will’s head rocked back, skull slamming into the wall behind him. He saw stars as his legs gave out beneath him and nausea settled thick and heavy in his gut. It took several seconds for his eyes to see beyond the thick blanket of white overwhelming his sight and when he could see again it was with great displeasure that he found Arnold mere inches from his own face.

“Consider that a warning, Mr. Graham. Because you are unique the King has taken an interest in you…and I would be lying if I said you were not a good match. However, I will only allow so much disrespect towards my King.” Arnold stood in a single, fluid movement, readjusting his shirt as he moved away from the still prone Will.

“A good match,” Will whispered out, head throbbing as he adjusted himself against the wall. “A good match for what, Arnold, a dessert for after the main course?”

“Somehow, despite your questions and your inability to remember, you know the answer to your own question. You know what is happening to you, what is *going* to happen to you. Which is why I can’t tell you anything more, I’m afraid. You must come to the truth yourself,” Arnold sighed and strolled back towards the stairs. “You’ll join us, sooner or later, whether you want to or not, although…,” He grinned, cocking his head to the side as his hand lit on the door’s handle. “Something tells me that you are nearly *bursting* at the seams to join us.” Arnold left on a chuckle, allowing the door to shut slowly and silently behind him as he vanished from the stairwell.

Will sat for some time as he’d fallen, head aching and mind whirring as he replayed, carefully, what had just happened. This “King” thing was something he could grasp quickly, though King of *whatt* exactly Will could only offer an educated guess. He’d been feeling a very intense “alternate dimension” vibe for several deaths now and while that might not have been completely accurate, it was the best idea he had for where he currently was. Determining the where, regardless of how interesting he might have found it under circumstances where he did not die every day, was not what he found so fascinating from this most curious interaction betwixt himself and Arnold.

No. No, it was the *us*.

It wasn’t just the word, or the unspoken acknowledgement that Arnold and Hannibal were working together. No, it was that there were others; more than just the two of them to be

taken into account here.

For several moments Will sat, legs outstretched lazily in front of him, skull pulsing and pain radiating out from the point of impact. Almost absentmindedly he pressed fingers to the spot and was unsurprised when they came back shiny and red; Arnold's strength was something he had once marveled at but was now coming to rely on for consistency's sake. Perhaps the only things he could be sure of, here in this hell dimension, was that death would find him (one way or another) before midnight, and that Arnold was entirely unpredictable now that Will was an object of interest to his "King."

Oh, and that Hannibal preferred to kill Will with his own apparently "Kingly" hands.

Will sighed and rubbed his eyes, gaze bleary and body exhausted despite having just awoken. He was beginning to wonder if his constant dying was having an effect on his body; sure, he awoke every morning as though the day before hadn't happened, and yet (and he was certain he'd seen a movie where the concept was the same he just couldn't quite place it) his body *was* beginning to exhibit signs of wear and tear. He felt not only the aches and pains of his most recent death when he awoke, he felt them all. His lungs burned from lack of oxygen, making it harder for him to travel up the stairs; his stomach and throat and back ached, the sensation of being stabbed never quite seemed to leave him. If he moved just right, or just wrong, as it were, he was bombarded by the sensation of his guts falling from his chest cavity.

When this happened, he often lost his lunch.

It took another ten minutes or so before Will was able to push himself to his feet, and another fifteen before the lightbulb went off in his head. It was as he was walking down the hallway of the top deck, weaving silently around slowing patrons, that his gaze caught on a crewmember; he was fairly certain it was Devan, the poor employee who was stuck in an infinite loop of being yelled at for over things they had no control over. Will paused, head cocked to the side as Devan strode past him, close enough for Will to smell them and their sweat on their skin.

It was because of their distance, or lack thereof, that Will saw the hiccup. The split-second pause in their footsteps just as they passed by him. Their eyes did not track him, and yet, Will knew they saw him.

Something heavy and fluttery and sickening dropped to his belly and that nausea was back full force. Will remained standing where Devan had passed him for almost three full minutes before his internal alarm began to ring that he had stayed in one place for too long.

We.

Will had arrived at the engine room again, body moving almost entirely on autopilot, but this time he simply paced, chewing absently on a ragged thumbnail as his thoughts raced in circles.

He blamed his worn body and exhausted mind that it took him so long to grasp what the hell Arnold had been talking about.

“The crew,” He breathed, frozen in his tracks as the realization finally dawned on him. “It’s the goddamn crew, isn’t it?”

His death that day was one of the few relatively painless ones; poison in his clam chowder, his fifth time killed in this manner (what could he say? Will was a sucker for a delicious clam chowder and not having a knife in his neck). The next morning brought a slew of thoughts and actions, possible ways of coping with this newfound information amidst the realization that, for whatever reason, he was not being affected like the rest of the passengers.

OoOoOoO

His thoughts returned to the present as he counted down the seconds before the arrival of Sam and Jonah. Briefly he thought to his subsequent exploration and investigation into the workings of his prison, remembering with a shudder the mounting horror he had experienced as he connected the dots. Whatever was happening on this ship was occurring to different groups of people in different ways amongst the passengers themselves. Through observation alone he quickly determined that those closest to whatever the hell that “meat grinder” room was (the one he avoided at all costs) were those most strongly affected. He had originally believed the man outside his door to be among the most sluggish but quickly found that there were entire families, those especially who were boarded just above the grinding room, were no longer capable of leaving their rooms, let alone their beds.

He hoped that he would, soon, either die forever or wake up from the nightmare that had become his life. The things he had seen over his time searching the rooms had become ingrained in his head, burned behind his retinas. Closing his eyes had become a battle against the nearly constant and consistent nausea as images of emaciated, half-mummified people flickered unbidden into his mind.

Will stood and put out his cigarette in a single, fluid movement. There would be time, he was sure, to wallow. Now, right in this second, Sam and Jonah were just coming into view and it was imperative that Will slide onto the elevator at just the right moment. Moving as quickly and quietly as a panther, Will remained silent as he padded around the still relatively-normal passengers milling about in the lobby. His gaze was occasionally drawn to a slumped over figure in the corner or to a collapsed corpse-like figure on the ground, but he did his best to shunt their image away, focusing with every part of his mind on his current objective. He had watched the pair, debating on whether he ought to try and surprise them or try and follow the elevator without interacting with them at all, before deciding to just approach them outright, but WHILE they were in the elevator. The thought there being that they wouldn’t deny him if they were already on it.

And if they decided to kill him, he might at least be able to find out which floor the party was on before they did.

He made it to the elevator just as the doors were beginning to slide shut.

“Hey, hey! Hold the elevator please,” And he slid past the doors, forcing them to remain open long enough for him to get on and face the men who, he thought, were having a hard time keeping the surprise from their faces. He wondered whether there were any more or less surprised than the first time they had found him collapsed in the elevator.

“Oh, sure, no problem,” Jonah stammered, green eyes flickering from the door to Will and back again. “Sorry we didn’t see you. Which floor?”

“Haven’t we all moved past this point, Jonah?” Will sighed, shaking his head ever so slightly, running a tired hand through frazzled hair. “Look, a while back, however the hell many days ago it was you invited me to a party. A staff party or something, right?”

Sam and Jonah paused and, silently, Sam leaned across Jonah and pressed the hold button on the elevator, bringing the machine lurching to a stop around them. For several moments, no one spoke. Will had, he felt, long since moved beyond his fear of death, being that he had died more than any single human being is meant to die. Why fear something that, each and every day, was utterly inevitable? Still, he found his heart fluttering and his breathing turning shallow as his gaze flickered back and forth between the couple, unsure of what their reactions might be. His sideways glance towards the pressed buttons had not helped as he had stepped into the elevator; the level where the restaurants were had been pressed and as far as he had seen, there never were parties going on in that part of the ship anytime in the evening. His only hope in finding the damn party now lay with the two men sharing silent, meaningful glances with one another.

“Yes,” Sam finally responded, closing the distance between himself and Will with a single step. Will was proud of himself for standing his ground but could not stop the hair rising along the back of his neck. Sam’s eyes had not left Will’s and for a heartbeat neither of them moved. Will couldn’t seem to find his breath and he could feel sweat gathering along the top of his brow, beading up as he wondered what the hell Sam was doing or what he intended to do.

“Yes, I suppose there really isn’t any point in pretending with you anymore, is there?” Was that Jonah growling beside them or was it just Will’s imagination? Will’s wary eyes flickered between the two men, watching them as carefully as the confined space allowed. “But the real question, Will,” Sam was very, very close now; Will could see the tiny flecks of gold rimming his dark irises. “Whether or not you’re sure you want to go to this party?”

Wait, what?

Will frowned, eyes narrowing. Why the hell WOULDN’T he want to go to the party? What did he have to lose, his life? At this point he was almost certain he’d died in almost every conceivable way and so far, the only thing he hadn’t done was attend the party. If nothing else, perhaps it would relieve some of the intense amount of stress his constant dying was causing him. He hoped, of course, that the party might illuminate some of what was happening to him. At the very least, he was looking for some confirmation on his current pet theory that the entire staff and crew were in on the horrible joke.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m sure I want to go to the party.”

“Wonderful,” Sam breathed, eyes glittering in the dim overhead lighting. “Wonderful. The party begins in 6 hours, at 9:30 sharp, and is on the lowest level of the ship; you couldn’t miss it even if you wanted to.” The man smiled just as the doors slid open behind Will. Jonah, who had not moved since Will had entered the elevator, shifted from his position against the wall and moved to stand beside Sam. Will would have had to be blind to ignore

the open hostility rolling off of Jonah; some kind of predatory warning that finally pushed Will back from Sam before he'd even thought about it. The openly possessive glare Jonah had leveled at Will brought goosebumps to his arms and as he stepped back into empty air he had only seconds to realize how stupid a mistake he'd just made before he slammed into the ground and the world went dark.

OoOoOoOoO

For the first time since he'd awoken in what was most assuredly Hell, Will felt like he was… centered. Things were not perfect, and he certainly hadn't figured out what was going on, but he was on the right track (or at least, he was on SOME kind of track). Much like his father, and his father's father, once he had some kind of momentum built up, he found himself calmer for it. More able to keep himself calm and in control of himself.

The panic could come later, when he arrived at the party.

He debated as he showered; he would be safe in his room until around the time the party started (the explosion wouldn't happen until around 9:45 if he was still around), but he also didn't have anything remotely appropriate for a party. What the hell did a person even wear for a demon party? He frowned as he toweled his hair dry, glancing with vague disinterest towards his half-unpacked bag in the corner of the room. Having not expected anything more than dinner alone in a half-empty restaurant once the rest of the people aboard had gone to bed, he was lucky to have brought a single pair of nice jeans.

So maybe it was time to hit the shops.

He smirked to himself as he stuffed his wallet down into his pocket and ducked out of his room. The man with the drinks was nowhere to be seen and Will had the brief thought that perhaps he hadn't been able to leave his bed before he shook the idea away and headed down the hallway. Money no longer had any meaning or purpose other than to purchase the deadly clam chowder that he couldn't seem to stop eating; what did it matter if he cleared out his meager bank account to purchase the fanciest and most expensive suit on the ship? After all, since this was probably going to be the most exciting of his deaths (the octopus one would forever hold the top spot but mostly because of the insanity of it), why not go out with a beautiful bang?

It took him four hours of not-so-silent judgment on the part of the suit shop's tailor before they had settled on something for him to wear; and only with the promise that he would DO something with that HAIR of his.

Standing in front of the mirror, adjusting the sleeves on his jacket, Will found himself impressed with the work done in such a short length of time. The pants and suit jacket were the same sapphire blue, dark and made of a material that was so soft and fit him so well that he wasn't sure it was real. Beneath was a collared shirt in a soft periwinkle blue and the tie, a blue color somewhere between the jacket and shirt, brought the entire ensemble together. Simple, elegant without overwhelming the man who was more comfortable in a nice pair of slacks or jeans and a sweater. The outfit was completed by a pair of shoes so shiny and black he could see his reflection in them. Behind him the tailor tutted and adjusted a small set of glasses on the edge of his nose, lips pursed as he surveyed his work.

“It will…suffice, I suppose,” The man sighed and rubbed at his temples. Will watched the man carefully from the corner of his eye as he continued adjusting his sleeve. His current working theory was that the “plague” (as he had begun calling whatever the hell was happening to the passengers) did not affect the staff members….but he was beginning to wonder if those who worked in the shops were, too, considered members of the staff? The man appeared far more robust than the overwhelming majority of the passengers, despite the fact that dressing Will appeared to have taken a few years off his life.

Will, for one, thought he looked pretty damn good.

“I’ll take it,” Will responded, turning to the side to inspect his profile in the mirror before him. “How much?” The man smiled, cocked his head to the side, and started forward. He was just a hair shorter than Will and it took him a split second too long before he realized the man was leaning over to whisper into his ear-

“No charge, William dear. Can’t have you looking anything less than…absolutely *delectable* for the party tonight, now can we?” The man chuckled and stepped away leaving Will feeling icy and sick. His theory was starting to become reality and, truly, he wasn’t sure how he felt about it.

Moving quickly and carefully Will changed back into his original clothes, allowed the man with the frightening glint in his eyes to fold and wrap his clothing, and made his way back to his room, doing his best to ignore what felt like the overt stares of those he passed. He needed to shave and try to do something with his hair and as long as he made it out of his room on time he didn’t need to worry about the impending explosion.

As he shaved and found some pomade-like substance he’d apparently packed what felt like eons ago, Will tried not to think of anything, a first since he’d started his death roulette. What he was about to do produced a feeling of abject and absolute terror, a shaking that filled out his hands and his arms and made it very difficult to shave without tearing his face up. Simultaneously, he frowned, staring at his half-shaved face in the mirror, he was feeling… anxiety? Not the same thing as the fear, no, he was feeling nervous.

He felt like he was preparing for the goddamn prom.

He took a step back and really looked at himself, something he hadn’t done in what felt like years but had probably been at least a “month” of death time. His hair was slicked back and away from his face, swept up and styled with the pomade (vanilla scented, even!). What he had shaved, thus far, was smooth and the razor burn was nearly non-existent, showing off the painfully slow process across his cheeks and neck with the fresh shaving kit he’d picked up on the way back to his room. Hell, he’d even picked up a cologne chosen specifically by the girl at the counter where he’d bought the shave kit. She had insisted that the one he’d been about to pick up, a small blue bottle with a ship on it, would succeed only in making everyone nearby ill. He’d walked out of the shop without having removed his wallet and at this point he was starting to feel like a kept man.

The flush spreading across his neck and chest and cheeks and nose was most assuredly a result of the steam-filled room and definitely not from the thought that he’d been afforded some modicum of power in whatever hellscape he currently found himself him. And it was

most assuredly not because he was looking forward to seeing the demon king again. He was most definitely, assuredly, positively, absolutely not looking forward to seeing Hannibal. How could he be?

He moved slowly and carefully, pushing these heated thoughts to the back of his mind, and by the time his hair was perfectly coiffed, and he was smelling clean and fresh and like whatever the hell was in that devilishly small and delicious bottle, it was 9 on the dot. Dressed to kill, Will felt ready to brave the bowels of the ship for what he felt was going to be some kind of magnificent showdown. Some small, quiet part of him wondered if he had dressed not to impress but for what would be his final death. As he exited his room and languidly headed to the elevators, pausing to admire artwork on the walls that he'd already memorized, Will could not help but feel that what he was doing, where he was going, was exactly right. Every moment it seemed was leading him here, to this moment, to this fucking party, of all things.

His mouth was dry as he called for the elevator. He'd considered, briefly, using the stairs but it was too close, time-wise, to when that couple would burst forth from a random door and knock him over the railing to this death. And he was not about to shave again anytime soon. Will was only vaguely surprised to see Sam and Jonah waiting for him when the elevator stopped, twin smiles radiating a curious combination between malice and excitement. They spread their arms and gestured for him to join them, each taking a step to the side to allow him space to stand between them, like they were bodyguards for the night. Will frowned and crossed his arms, eyebrow raising as he took them in.

"The last time I got into an elevator with you two I didn't step back out."

"To be fair, you should have been looking where you were going."

"Come on, Jonah, that's not very nice! And it's certainly no way to speak to the guest of honor, now is it?" Sam huffed, tossing a strand of hair back from his face with a head shake. Everything felt rehearsed, pre-prepared for him and it made the hair stand up along the back of his neck.

"I think I'd much rather take the next one, thank you," He managed after a moment, trying to keep his heart rate under control. The two men shared a meaningful look, balefully sighing and pursing their lips.

"We would…suggest you rethink that, William," Jonah began.

"Not all of us are in agreement as to whether you are…fit to join us, William. Traveling to parts of the ship where you ought not to be is neither a safe, nor a good idea." Sam's right hand remained on the wall, keeping the doors open as they tried to coax him in to join them.

Will tried to ignore the bead of sweat that clung to his hairline; his attempt to remain calm and steadfast in his decision to arrive solo was quickly beginning to waver as his gaze flickered back and forth between the two men in the elevator. He glanced at the tiny gap between the elevator and was thrown back to his most recent death. It would have been impossible, it slowly dawned on him, for him to have fallen to his death in the shaft. He'd been on the damn thing so where the hell had he fallen? It had seemed the most nonchalant,

and certainly one of the fastest, deaths that had occurred so far and it hadn't been until this very moment, faced with the prospect of once again sharing the tiny space with them, that he realized how wrong that death had been.

"You worry too much, Will!" Sam said with a laugh. "We won't pull any more tricks with time and space and elevator shafts, at least, not anytime soon. We are under the strictest of orders not to ruin that beautiful suit." From his side Jonah had made an open show of removing a pocket watch, not a phone or wristwatch but an honest to God pocket watch, and grimacing at the time.

"Listen," Jonah was, apparently, sick of Will's shit and was making it as obvious as possible with the most irritated affect Will had ever heard. "We are cutting it damn close here. You aren't he only one who needs to worry about being late. Get in, William, or I'm closing the doors." Before Will allowed his thoughts to run away from him, he was in the elevator and pressed as close to the wall and as far from the devilish duo as the crowded space allowed for. Sam chuckled and reached down to entwine his hand with Jonah's as Jonah pulled away from the button he'd been using to keep the doors open.

"Now William," Sam began. "When we exit the elevator, you will need to walk behind us. But walk quickly and stay sharp. We can't get into too much detail, business secrets and all that, but I wasn't lying when we said that there are some of us who aren't too keen on your arrival. And there are some who are downright furious that you've captured the King's eye." Will was beginning to wonder if there was some kind of hierarchy to these guys, or if "King" was just as good as any other title to describe the monster he'd been running from. Who, or what, had decided that the monster was their King?

"Obviously to attack you openly would warrant a swift and harsh punishment meted out, especially in this moment wherein the King himself has claim," Will could do little but blink and file away the most confusing series of sentences he had ever heard in his life. "But not all of us have even half a brain down here. I would be shocked if someone didn't try something."

"Whether you like us or not," Jonah sighed and pulled Sam into an embrace against the wall of the elevator. "We have been designated as your guardians this evening. You would do well to remember that the only thing keeping us from slaughtering you ourselves is the respect, fear, and absolute love we have for our King. You are worth only what the King deigns to place your value at." Sam playfully bumped his hip into Jonah's as the elevator slowed to a stop.

"Hush now, darling, you're just confusing him! All he really needs to know, all he truly has to comprehend, is that tonight is a night of celebration and fun!" Sam was nearly bouncing as the doors slid open silently in front of them. He looped arms with Jonah, tossed a wink at Will, and started forward.

Will had only seconds to decide if he was going through with this, if he was really, truly, going to step off the elevator, before the doors began to slide shut. He decided quickly that thinking too much tonight was going to land him in trouble and, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, Will slid free of the elevator and quickly caught up with the steadily striding duo. The hallway was quiet, tomb-like in the dim overhead lighting and the lack of people. Muffled sounds drifted from some vague distant spot and as they stepped together

across the carpeted floor Will was suddenly and very uncomfortably aware that he was being watched. The hairs along the back of his neck stood on end and he was unable to stop the shiver that ran from his scalp to his toes. The apparent fact that there was no one physically in the hallway with them did nothing to lessen the sensation and, as they drew nearer the muffled sounds (music, it seemed) the feeling only grew stronger.

“Don’t worry, Will,” Came Jonah’s soft voice, his face turned to profile as he spoke to Will. “Just remember: Whatever happens tonight, none but the King will lay a hand upon you. On that we are sworn.”

Somehow, this was not comforting.

Knowing, however, that he was not just imaging the eyes burning holes in the back of his head *was* soothing and after a couple of seconds he was able to relax, rolling his shoulders in an attempt to release the tension built up there.

Less than a minute had passed as they walked before they were turning down a different hallway and the music grew in volume. It was all bass and rhythm and heavy and was not at all what he had expected the party to have for a soundtrack. Somehow, despite having had less than a real conversation with the monster he was about to meet for a showdown, Will had thought this sort of music to be beneath him. Purposeless, perhaps, or lacking in some kind of mystique that had thus far surrounded the King.

A handful of twists and turns later brought them to a set of double doors, familiar to the ones several levels above that guarded the ballroom (where the chandelier had crushed him in one of his first, and wackiest, rounds of death). Sam and Jonah had paused, Sam’s hand outstretched toward the doors. Will could feel the bass in his shoes, now, and beneath the cool façade that he had somehow managed to maintain, he could feel his heart racing in time with the muffled sounds. The confusion he was experiencing must have shown on his face; Jonah chuckled from where he and Sam stood and offered a small shrug before speaking.

“The King understands and considers his subjects whenever we throw these parties of ours. It’s a little difficult to explain…but at this point in our journey, many of us become a little… frenzied.” The look on Jonah’s face was something close to feral and Will could feel the shift in them as they reached out to the door. Whatever was happening in there was affected his guides even before they set foot inside; Sam was visibly vibrating and Jonah’s breathing had become heavier.

“Don’t forget, Will,” Jonah whispered in a hoarse voice as their hands closed around the knobs simultaneously. “We’ll be watching.”

And then they opened the doors.

Chapter End Notes

So this last year has been WILD. Like... Like break-ups, coming outs, school, and work... I don't think things will ever be NOT wild or consistent until at least school ends. I'll get my batchelor's and then, by god, I'm taking a break and hopefully getting myself under control. Until then, having you guys care and read and comment has made me so happy; anytime I stopped wanting to write I would check out my comments and it made me do a little more and a little more. I have so many plans and things for different fics (this one I THINK only has a chapter left) with my Hannigram hubbies so hopefully you guys will stick around for those, too!

For real??? Thanks for the support and I hope you like this chapter. Not quite as sexy but hopefully the next one will have at least ten degrees more sexiness.

As always, constructive crits are always welcome but keep your negative baloney out of my ballpark.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!